

A photograph of a row of colorful Victorian houses, likely the 'Painted Ladies' in San Francisco. The houses are multi-story, with various colors like red, white, and blue. The image is slightly blurred and has a soft, dreamy quality. The text is overlaid on the image in a red, cursive font.

# *More Selected Short Stories*

*Dan Schneider*

# **More Selected Short Stories**

by

Dan Schneider

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[The Preparation](#)

[Roger Grimsby Lives!](#)

[Apex Yards](#)

[The Mayor Of Maspeth](#)

[In The Genes](#)

[The Wrath Of Angelina Jolie](#)

[The Immaterial Return Of Travis Dietz](#)

[Grace Is A Name Or A Thing](#)

[2](#)

[A Sample](#)

[The Hill That Wasn't](#)

[Believe In The Book](#)

[The Silent Swim Of The Hawk](#)

[An Eye Other Than Human](#)

[The Sixth Day?](#)

## Introduction

This second selection of my short stories contains a single tale from each of the short story books I have done.

The first two stories, *The Preparation* and *Roger Grimsby Lives!*, from the first two collections, *21 Conversations* and *American Lace*, are both classics that delve into New York life of the late 20<sup>th</sup> and early 21<sup>st</sup> Centuries. The *Tales Of Notice* tale, *Apex Yards*, is about a real life area, Atlas Terminal, that was a rundown train hub and major drug dealing center in the 1960s through 1980s, that has since been gentrified into a high end urban mall, much the way much of the seedy downtown Manhattan portrayed in classic films from the 1970s has been Disneyfied. Both Apex Yards and Atlas Terminal get their due in portions of the fictive Schneiderverse, but both are basically interchangeable and refer to the same area, in both spacetime and type.

*The Mayor Of Maspeth*, from *Newtown*, is the introduction to the Crooms family, that figures prominently in the first of my New York Quartet novels, *Tumbleweeds*. Like many New York nabes, the ‘Mayor’ is really just an old timer the rest of the nabe or block looks up to. *In The Genes* and *The Wrath Of Angelina Jolie*, from *21 More Conversations* and *American Embroidery*, are follow-ups or different points of view on the tales told in *The Preparation* and *Roger Grimsby Lives!* The intent was to show, in these two sets of companion books, that stories can be told quite well and from quite differing points of view, and that these two qualities are not mutually opposing.

*The Immaterial Return Of Travis Dietz* from *The Compass Rose Sabbath*, is that collection’s final tale, and a great take on Texas of the early 21<sup>st</sup> Century, as well as the impact, or not, of art in life. The next three tales, *Grace is a Name Or A Thing*, from *Domesticities In Eleven Cities*, the 2<sup>nd</sup> scene from *Scenes From A City*, and *A Sample*, from *Ugly Girls*, deal with things that are seemingly mundane- such as the things war does to people who were not even born at the time, a memory of a beautiful woman, to the giving of urine samples.

*The Hill That Wasn’t*, from *Thirteen Ways Of Selling The Self*, is also a memory piece, about what a young child recalls being revealed as not like it was. *Believe In The Book*, from *A Little Book Of Dyings*, is about a senior citizen I knew, who lost all his money in investments, and then had to do the same crappy telesales job I was doing, well into his 70s. In the story, the fellow’s name is Tom Selleck, but, in real life, the man’s name was James

Garner. Other than that, I totally and faithfully recreate the life and mannerisms of a man who may now be dead. *The Silent Swim Of The Hawk*, from *Summer In A Dozen Days*, is a tale that has Magical realist elements, although it is far more thoroughly told and character driven. *An Eye Other Than Human*, from *This Human Animal*, gets its title from a quote by the great American naturalist and essayist, Loren Eiseley, and I recently completed an Absurdist influenced play with the almost identical title, *Eye Other Than Human*. The tale is a sequel to a story titled *Something Of The Human*, from *Monarchs Of New York*, and while the ‘eye other’ referred to in the play may belong to an extraterrestrial or an audience member, the ‘eye other’ in this tale likely refers to domesticated cats or dogs.

The book’s final tale, a novella called *The Sixth Day?*, from *I, Imperial*, evolved from my own work situation, at the time, as well as a chance encounter I, and my wife Jessica, had one day when we were driving through the Hill Country of Texas, and that was seeing and learning of The Christian Motorcyclists Association.

So, now that you know a bit more than you should, read on!

# The Preparation

The subways of New York have always gotten a bad rap, in my opinion. Yeah, years ago they were filthy, but that was before Guiliani became Mayor. Yes, there's crime, and ignorant kids. I spent many years looking down on the train floor, seeing patterns in the dirty, dried, pressed flat gum, but one day, about three years ago, after over thirty years of taking the train into work, I decided that I had finished with gum gazing for good. I was over fifty years old, for Christ's sake. If some motherfuckin' lousy little piss ant punk wanted to shiv me over looking in his direction for an eighth of a second too long, then, by all means, go ahead, you lousy little piece of shit!

And I was right to do so. It wasn't one of those life altering moments like Iwo Jima, or the Tet Offensive, or 9/11, but it was my life and it did change me, so maybe it really was one of those moments, in miniature. Who's to say that what one man walks by isn't something that another, even if it's a thousand years later, won't find infinitely fascinating? For example, while looking up from the subway floor I discovered that the ads that used to be pasted were no longer what they were. They were alot more vibrant, colorful. Then I noticed, one day, across this big orange- and I mean bright orange pastel color, across this big orange ad for something- I forget what because all that was prominent were the immense breasts of this model in this orange colored ad. Across these big orange colored breasts was this fuckin' huge brown, translucent cockroach. It was like an amber piece of something or other across these big orange knockers.

Yes, a cockroach at least two or three inches long, slowly clinging on to one of the breasts, a good seven feet above the floor of the car, across from me, speeding along the New York subways at seventy or eighty miles an hour. Most people would probably have just thought it some deep symbolic advertising gag to get you to, I don't know, desire to buy milk because cockroaches love to drink it? But, the roach was real. It wasn't a part of the ad. It moved, slightly. It was three dimensional. As the subway car was empty, except for a sleeping wino at one end, and an old baglady at the other end, and me sitting in the middle, across from this oddly lascivious insect, I decided to pull out a rubber band I had in my pocket protector, one I have had for over fifteen years. It's so old the plastic is dried and cracking, and little bits of dried plastic fuzz crumbles away into my shirt pockets every day. But,

I've kept this big red rubber band with me for years, in case of an emergency. I don't know, perhaps to use as a tourniquet, or something. But, now I believe, I have found its ultimate purpose. Even a rubber band has a purpose. As the train whistled on I aimed the rubber band at the cockroach with my right thumb, and pulled back on the other end with my left hand.

Then, it started to move. Slowly, but surely. That goddamn roach knew what I was doing. It sensed it. Being no scientist I did not know whether its slowness of motion was due to the train's moving or what. But, it was almost as if the roach were daring me to take it out, make my task a little harder. Man or roach- which was the superior beast? Little did it know that I was an expert slingshotter in my youth. I won several contests when I was in the *Boy Scouts* for a year, back in the fifties. Ok, I thought, you wanna take on the Master? You wanna tempt fate? Ok, you little six-legged bastard, you're gonna get it, and understand that although your kind has been around longer, there's a new king in town, or something like that.

*And I got it!* The roach was struck just alongside its left side legs, enough to break the surface tension it held with the ad, and send it careening to the floor. For some reason I was elated, and jumped up, with my arms triumphant, as if I won an Olympic Medal. Then the train screeched to a halt for the next stop and I lost my balance, falling to the floor too quickly for me to put my hands down in time to brace myself as I hit the floor. My nose fell right onto the floor and it hurt. I didn't detect any blood leaking from it, as I rose back to my seat, but it made a squooshy, liquidy sound, however slight, that I could hear when I rubbed it. I was sure it was gonna balloon up to twice its size in the next hour or two. As I rubbed it I'd almost forgotten about the roach that I had dislodged from the ad with the rubber band. I looked to the floor and saw the roach, on top of the red rubber band, standing over it, triumphantly, like a conqueror, looking directly at me with its hideous little eyes. I could swear that it was mocking me, and my misfortune, laughing, cackling at me with its foul little pincers, as if its being a roach that had survived a fall induced by a rubber band somehow trumped my minor embarrassment, even though I was a human, and could actually imbue into it qualities I knew it did not have, while all it could do was glower without reason at a thing that was far superior to it, yet that it had no knowledge of my knowing my superiority.

But, still, it cackled, until the door behind it opened and it was summarily crushed under the red heels of a woman's shoe. I took an unseemly joy in its

end, and smiled. To be crushed into oblivion by a female foot. One which happened to be attached to a quite handsome female leg, that extended the duration of my smile at the death of the bug. That was attached to a fairly attractive woman of about forty to forty-five years old. She had curly blond hair, and was wearing a nice coat that covered a pink blouse, which was paired with a light tan skirt, that covered up what I was sure was the best part of her taut legs. She was in great shape. As my gaze made its way northward I could tell she was one of those subwayfarers like I used to be, never averting her gaze from the subway floor, although she didn't notice the green and brown glob of goo that used to be the uppity cockroach that she inadvertently killed.

The joy of first the cockroach's death, and then the appearance of the attractive woman who sat across from me almost made me forget that this was the last time I'd be going in to work. I was going there just to pick up my last paycheck. I'd been laid off at the sales office. I was only four years away from retirement, yet the bastards had to clear out the old guys like me, before we were a hundred percent vested. The worst part was first they made me slowly but surely thin out the office staff, then, when all my support was gone, they called me into their office to tell me that circumstances beyond their control had led them to believe it was best if the company and I parted ways. The severance package wasn't bad, but what'll I do till I can start collecting Social Security? Men my age are shit out of luck in the job market these days.

But, who am I to bitch? It's not like I never took out my frustrations on a poor schlub. There was Doug Collins. He was the first guy I axed when the word came down. Not that he was the least productive worker, either. I just couldn't stand him. He wasn't unfriendly, he wasn't snide, it was just that, to me, he wasn't. He wasn't anything- just a thing I shared time with and had no common ground nor cause with. And that was enough for me to ruin his life for a while, before doing so to far more deserving characters, but ones I'd been in the trenches with longer, you know? It's just human nature. I thought about it this way- it wasn't my decision to have to fire someone, so who would I feel the least guilt about firing? Someone competent, who I didn't like for whatever reasons, or some goofball I knew for many years? Someone who knew many of the same people and stories? It's about shared history, not worthiness. That's the American Way, and anyone who says otherwise is bullshitting you, or too young or stupid to know better. I actually liked being



able to target someone, and fob it off on others. The power to end a career....I understood why they were doing the same to me, later, for, then, after I, and the other middle managers, had weeded out all the guys we knew from way back, it was our turn.

But, the worst thing, if I'm being honest, is that very fact that I *really enjoyed* letting Collins go. It made me feel really good, to know he, and not, say, Selkiewicz was the schmo whose day was gonna be ruined. The way Collins parted his hair, the way he opened his lunch sack, and always, always going on about him and his wife- how in love they still were after seventeen years. But, I wondered, if things had been going better in my life, at that time, or earlier, would I have taken such sheer joy in bringing misery into another person's life? After all, Collins had a wife and three kids. Not that I let him see my joy- I pretended to be reluctant, and all. He probably still considers me a reliable reference. Yet, I was the one who wrote up the 'official' paper trail reason for his being terminated. I made up bullshit- the type that cannot be proved or disproved, so that if he sued the company for wrongful termination we could crush him like a bug- like that roach. It was our word against his. I also faked and backdated a few 'written warnings' in his file, and forged his written signature of acknowledgement. I was pretty good. In another life I might've had a career in crime. This was all for good measure. It was his word against ours. He'd have to prove he was not guilty of incompetence and petty crap, instead of the company proving he was. I felt like a casino pit boss. Then, I felt bad for Collins. But, he was still only about forty- he wouldn't have as rough a time latching on somewhere else. It might not be as good a job as he had with the company, but that's life- until it happens to you. I actually thought the bastards who canned me were gonna transfer me to the Hackensack office. It would've been a long hike, but I knew Marty DiSacco was retiring and they'd need an old hand to steer that ship right for a few years. It all made sense when they called me into the office and said, 'Gene, there's something we need to discuss....'

And they did. And I got my things, this was last Friday, and left. I just left. No big scene. I didn't even tell anyone else on the crew what had happened. They'd probably pelt me with questions today. So, here I am, a week later, going in for my final paycheck and severance and holiday and vacation pay. Oh, I'll do ok financially, till I can retire. I'm smart enough to have invested wisely. I've got a good portfolio. Even if I never work again. But, that's not the point. What is the point I have no clue. I'm like that guy, over there, who

got on with sexy 'Legs' here, that old blind man. Probably a faker, but then he's still blind, in the existential sense, a scam artist, someone who preys off of others, sort of like, well, me. Although I didn't go out of my way to prey on Collins, I just did so when the opportunity arose. If that blind guy's a predator, I'm just a carrion feeder.

Oh, shit, listen to me prattle on like some politically correct *pity me, please* type. I paid my taxes, was a good husband- even though Ann and I divorced. I've done alright by the kids. So, I live in a little rent-controlled hole? I could've done worse- alot worse. This goddamn city's like a prison, to everyone. I'm just another cellmate. The cosmos ain't got it out for me. That's just paranoia. That's like thinking that little roach was mocking me. It was just laughing at its own demise. Yeah, that's it. Maybe it divined the irony of being crushed under the weight of the shapely calves of old 'Legs' here. Oh, she looked up when I thought of 'Legs' as her name. I think she smiled. Let me be bold:

'Hi.'

'Hi.' she said. That's a start.

'Y'know, it's kind of funny. When you walked into the subway car you didn't notice it but you stepped on this cockroach I was eyeing and- '

'Really?' She looked down at her feet and saw the ooze on the end of her heel, took out a tissue, wiped it off, and tossed the tissue under the seat.

She looked up at me, smiled, and said, 'You won't report me for being a litterbug, right?'

'Mum's the word.' We both laughed. 'Say, I didn't mean to disturb you by telling you that, but I just thought it was funny. That's all. I mean, I was just having a little fun trying to think what a bug thinks, like if that one was laughing at me, and then the door opened, and you just crushed the little bastard.'

'I hate roaches anyway. They're disgusting things.' Her face soured, then shot back to a smile, as if needing to maintain a pose in front of me. I felt kind of flattered that an attractive woman, a total stranger, would feel she needed to keep up appearances in front of a guy like me.

'Yeah, but aside from getting killed by attractive female legs they don't have it so bad.' I thought it was real smooth of me to compliment her in such a manner that I could dismiss as offhandedness if she took offense, or was disturbed by my come on.

She looked down at her legs, crossed them, and said, 'Oh, thank you. Yes, I

guess they do. They have no worries to speak of. Bugs, I mean, except for being eaten by birds or other bugs. Even a pile of garbage, to them, is a feast. They've got no worries over mortgages, children, the rat race, or....'

At that she started to stifle a tear, then two or three. I could tell that she was greatly disturbed and a part of me wanted to sit next to her, put my arm around her, and reassure her, even though what I might be bracing her against was something truly tragic, and my real reason for comfort-giving was to cop a feel. So, I stayed put, not wanting to appear an overactive pervert.

'Look, I'm sorry, I didn't mean to make you cry.'

She said, 'Oh, It's not you. It's just, well, my marriage is ending and....even though I'm over the betrayal, I'm still not....'

'Oh, wow, I'm sorry to hear that, I had no idea.'

'Oh, there's nothing to be sorry about. Marriages end, just like cockroach's lives. It was over for years, then something just changed in Talbot.'

Talbot? *What a wussy name.* I bet she hasn't had a real man since before she got hitched. I sympathized, 'Mid-life crisis?'

'No. One day he was walking along Forty-Seventh Street and these two furniture moving men were coming out of a store, with a heavy package. Talbot was not watching where he was going, too busy on his cell phone, on a business call. So, he walks right into the box, and it jostles out of the movers' hands, and falls right on his big right toe. Crushing it- bone and flesh. It was so mangled that it eventually had to be amputated.'

'Wow, ' I said.

'Yet, he never recovered. Not that losing a toe is the end all and be all, but he got all philosophical and things. He just sort of detached. Then, about six months after losing his toe I was checking our credit card bill, because after years of always paying it off right away he had let the card max out. So, I went through the bill and discovered that he had made eight charges to an escort service since he lost his toe. When he came home that night I confronted him, and he admitted all. He was using prostitutes as a substitute for that lost part of himself his missing toe represented. I asked why he couldn't just confide in me. Then he said he'd fallen in love with a nineteen year old escort and wanted a divorce. I thought it was all just a joke.'

'I don't know what to say,' I said.

'I agreed to it. I didn't care. I had stopped really loving him long ago, and he me. If he wanted to waste his time and money with some prostitute, so be it. I'm still young enough, and I work at NYU. There are any number of

professors who've shown an interest, you know?'

'I'm sure, you're a very attractive lady.'

'Thank you.' she said, 'So, what's your story?'

'Oh, me? I was just laid off last week, after thirty plus years at my company.'

'That's terrible.'

'Oh, maybe it's for the best. Maybe my losing my job is like your husband losing his big toe. *Mazel tov*, as the Jews say.'

'That's a good outlook- what did you say your name was?'

'Gene. Gene Monaghan.'

'Nice to meet you Gene. My name is Amy Falco.'

'Hi, Amy.'

'Y'see, the reason I don't feel that blue is a part of me feels I was too smug a bastard.'

'Too smug?' she said.

'Yeah, here I was, going along all these years, thinking I had made it, gotten to a point where nothing short of a bullet could touch me- y'know, end it all. I was one of that small *elite* that seems secure in their life, their job. I got fat and smug- at least that's my rationale. Then, again, I've done things I'm not proud of, and enjoyed doing them at the time. Maybe there is karma- what the hell do I know? I mean, I had my failures. My wife left me years ago, but we're still friendly. And I did alright, financially. Even though I never went to college. These days it's nearly impossible to do as well, but when I started out hard work meant something, really meant something. Nowadays, you're just a fool- the bastards will use you, lie to you, then turn you out. They make you be like them, be a clone, a cookie cutter employee, or no employee. Be like them, or die. Companies will kill you- either your body, your soul, and often both. Show loyalty to no one but those you love. *Fuck companies!*'

'There's no guarantee. Life isn't fair, but it seems it's less fair for some,' said Amy.

'I mean, there were times I thought I could start my own business, but the time was never right, and I'm a hundred percent or nothing sort of guy. If I'm not gonna go all out I'm just not gonna go at all. That's just the way I see things, not that that's something that's a Universal Law. But it's a Catch 22 type of thing.'

'I think things would be better if it were a Universal Law.'

'Really?'

‘Yeah. I mean, when I was in college I was a real bitch. I slept around no more than your average girls, but I took a certain pride in controlling the boys who liked me. I knew

what they wanted. Like, I just crossed my legs a while ago so you’d notice them, find me attractive, want to talk to me.’

‘It worked, didn’t it? And it’s not like I didn’t want to talk to you. You’re very attractive, or hadn’t I mentioned that?’

She blushed.

‘You’re not a bad looking man, yourself, even if you are without a job.’

‘I’ve been out of work before. Back in the late 60s, when I was a kid. I remember how I’d only apply at one job at a time, so that I wouldn’t have to accept a job, just to quit if a better one came along. I was so honest and honorable. Can you believe that? What pompous naïve bullshit! Aging is no grace, but it sure beats stupidity like that. Yeah, unemployment is the worst- only a terminal disease is worse- especially if you’re canned for no fault of your own.’

‘Well, I used to do similar things. I used to have a policy to never date a co-worker, but found out I missed out on a lot of possible good catches. I said *‘I’m here to work, not find a husband!’* and stuck with that for quite a few years, until loneliness started laughing at me- not unlike your dead little friend there.’

‘What’d you do?’

‘I changed the rules. And the first man I dated turned out to be my husband, soon to be ex-husband.’

I chuckled, then asked forgiveness, but she was chuckling, as well. We kept this up until I realized I had missed my exit. The subway train flew on, far under the mythic city, and when the moment ended I had Amy’s cell phone number, as I exited the car. As it pulled away from the station I waved to her and she waved back, never having left the seat she was in. Then, I had a terrible thought- could it be she deliberately gave me a wrong number, like some high school snotnose, just to get rid of lecherous old me? I decided to use my cell phone to dial it, to see if she was shining me on, or not. With my luck, she had just taken pity on an old man and given me the number for a pizza parlor.

On the fifth ring I heard a voice, ‘Is that you, already?’

I was ready.

# Roger Grimsby Lives!

He could not get the sound of Warner Wolf's annoying voice out of his head. That damned sportscaster on Channel 7- *WABC Eyewitness News*. It was only a year or so after he had replaced Howard Cosell as the main sportscaster at the station, but still- all Wolf could say was, 'Let's go to the videotape!', then laugh and make a fool of himself. He had no real personality, save being a buffoon. At least Cosell, as nasty as he could sometimes be, would argue back and forth with the rest of the news team. There was sort of a competition between them.

It was memories like this which flickered through his mind, subtly weaving his own meager life with the momentary thread of minor celebrities. There had been that time, last year, when he was walking in the city, and had seen the movie star Angelina Jolie, coming out of a fancy hotel. He adored her, and had all of her movies on DVD. It was only a few months earlier that some magazine had said she was the sexiest woman alive. He agreed, and added that she was the sexiest woman alive, dead, or ever to be; although the rumors of her breaking up Brad Pitt's marriage disturbed him. He recalled seeing her, in a sleek, shiny dress, exiting her hotel for some occasion- a rally for some charity she supported. That's when he saw it. Angelina Jolie, sexiest woman on the planet, was not wearing a bra, and he could see her stiff nipples, on this sixty degree day, absolutely bulging through her dress. A part of him was entranced by her bosom's bounce, drawn to follow their nipples' every motion, like the old Mitch Miller follow the bouncing ball sing alongs from his youth. Then they, and she, were gone inside a limousine. He was more hooked on the evanescent movie starlet than ever before. But even that memory of his ultimate Hollywood fantasy babe was not powerful enough to erase his fondest memories of the one man who ruled over everything that was his life.

He can still remember, as a little boy, and sitting with his father, to watch the tv news. His dad would open up a bottle of *Schmidt's* beer, after a hard day's work at the factory. He never quite understood exactly what it was that his father did, although it had something to do with medicine, or rather the making of little machines that helped people live better. He thought his dad once said it had to do with helping people hear better. Whatever it was, it was worth it, because the best memories he ever had of his dad was of watching

the tv news with him. He recalled the images of the Vietnam War, every night, although he never quite knew where that country was, or why so many families he knew were sad, because their sons or husbands were dying. Then there was Watergate- whatever that was. All he knew was that it was something bad that the President had done. His dad never liked President Richard Nixon. He recalled how his dad would yell at the black and white images of the President and he would tell his dad, 'Dad, the President can't hear you- it's just a tv show he's on!' Then President Nixon quit his job, and he could never recall his dad ever being happier. His mom told him that the only days she could remember his dad being happier were the day they got married and the day he was born. That made him feel good, that he made his dad happier than President Richard Nixon could.

His dad also liked the local news, especially Channel 7- *WABC Eyewitness News*. Let's see- there was Howard Cosell, who did double duty as the nightly sportscaster before Warner Wolf. His dad was not a big fan of Cosell's either. He remembered that he first saw Howard Cosell when he and his dad watched a prizefight on tv, between Muhammad Ali- another person his dad hated- and Ken Norton, who was his favorite boxer. Norton broke Ali's jaw and his father was happier than any other time he knew his dad, except for a year or so later when President Nixon quit. He didn't like Howard Cosell either- he had a funny voice and always pretended he was smarter than anyone else. Then, he remembered, he had seen Howard Cosell once before- on his favorite tv show, *The Odd Couple*. He liked Oscar Madison, the fake sportswriter on that tv show, played by Jack Klugman, but Cosell was just not a nice man. When Warner Wolf replaced Cosell he was happy, that is until Wolf started opening his own loud mouth.

Then there was entertainment reporter Rona Barrett- who was really just a ditzy gossip columnist. She was a pretty lady, but wore a lot of makeup, and she had a funny way of speaking, too. But it was different from Howard Cosell's or Warner Wolf's, partly because she wasn't a man and partly because it was just a funny voice. Then, one day, she was no longer on the news. There was also the speech impedimentally challenged reporter Roseanne Scamardella, who would later be parodied on *Saturday Night Live* as Roseanne Rosannadanna. Scamardella was a typical Brooklyn sort of woman- not pretty, not feminine, but ballsy- the sort of lady you'd only find in New York. And he liked that, and her. But, there was one thing that stuck out about her, to him, and it was not a good thing. Roseanne Scamardella had

brown teeth. He remembered asking his dad if she had wooden teeth like George Washington and his dad told her, 'No, she just has a bad dentist.' Even worse than a bad dentist was that she always seemed to have a piece of spinach or something stuck between her teeth, at least three times a week, and whenever he saw it he couldn't understand what she was saying because he always focused on the brown teeth and piece of spinach, rather than her words. He figured that she just didn't like using toothpicks

That was not true about John Johnson. He was the only black reporter at the tv station, at the time, but was always dressed very nicely. He had the whitest teeth on tv, and was always smiling. He could be reporting on a fire, a hurricane, a murder, or whatever bad things were happening around the city, but he was always smiling. That smile, and his bushy afro were things that he remembered the most about John Johnson. His mother called him a 'token black' and he never understood what that meant, because he had seen what a token looked like when he would take a bus to school, and John Johnson looked nothing like a token. First off, he was not made of metal, was not small, round, with a hole in the middle, nor was he shiny like gold. And, whenever he had traveled on the buses or subways he could never recall seeing John Johnson. But, he was very dapper. 'Dapper' was a word that he learned in school, and although he never could quite remember exactly what it meant he knew that the word was well applied to John Johnson. He also focused mostly on 'black news', although the dean of black newscasters at the time was a fellow named Bill McCreary, who actually had a news program on another station, Channel 5, called *Black News*. He liked that tv show's theme song.

Another person on the *Eyewitness News* show was political reporter Milton Lewis- a shriveled, little bow-tie wearing homunculus who seemed to rejoice in 1973, when a man shorter than him, Abraham Beame, was elected Mayor of the City. Milton Lewis haunted the halls of Gracie Mansion like Jacob Marley. It seemed he was concerned if the Mayor farted, and if he did he would report how long the fart lasted, how badly it smelled, and how many people had heard it. Then there was Geraldo Rivera- yes, that Geraldo Rivera, the former Gerry Rivers, as it was rumored- a Jew turned Puerto Rican who had gained fame, a few years earlier, exposing the excesses of the New York State Mental Health System. There was just something about Geraldo Rivera that rubbed many people the wrong way. He never liked the man, either. Then, about twenty years later he recalled that Geraldo Rivera was the guy



who had that terrible tv show where people were always fighting. Perhaps it was his faux machismo, or his presumption that he was somehow a hunk, especially with his grotesque greasy handle bar mustache, that made most people dislike him. Or, it could be that he was just a bad tv reporter.

Then there were the two anchormen- the first being Bill Beutel, a handsome, genial man of no great lasting impression. He was considered the happy anchor, the man who would read to you the good news. His mother told him that her favorite tv newsman was Bill Beutel, and that he could park his slippers under her bed any day. What parking things had to do with tv news he did not know. He only knew Bill Beutel was the man who would read news headlines during commercial breaks, during *The 4:30 Movie*. Whenever he got home from school, and before he did his homework and had supper, he would unwind by watching *The 4:30 Movie*. It usually had a theme during a whole week- like *Godzilla* movies or movies with John Wayne- things like that. But, at about 5:30, every day, Bill Beutel would interrupt the movie to tell people what stories were gonna be on at 6 o'clock. He never understood this, as most people were content to wait till the movie was over before they'd watch the new. It's not as if the news was going anywhere. Ok, if there was a fire or a shootout he could understand, but for anything else it was just a waste of time.

Bill Beutel was the sort of man that you'd see on a bus and smile at, because he looked nice, and he looked like he'd never curse at you, much less mug you. He was rather inoffensive, and bland- the sort of model of what a tv anchorman should be, which was an archetype that quickly spread around the country to local tv stations as far as Iowa and Wyoming, as the cry, 'We need our own Bill Beutel.', was heard across the land, in newsroom after newsroom.

The cry that was never heard was, 'We need our own Roger Grimsby!' Grimsby was the other anchorman for *Eyewitness News*, back in the 70s, and through the mid-80s. He was a gruff, balding man with a dour look permanently pasted onto his liver spotted face (although some called it an out and out scowl), and a sarcastic wit that he often employed in puncturing his colleagues' egos. He would often spar with Howard Cosell, whose erudition was never quite able to overcome Grimsby's nasty, although veiled, retorts. During one night, when almost hurricane force winds were blowing, it was time to do the sports and Grimsby said that the whole city was now feeling winds the likes of which he endured every evening from Cosell.

Then there was Tex Antoine, the weatherman who was noted for often showing up to do forecasts while drunk. He would supplement his drinking by doing bizarre, and reputedly raunchy, cartoons across the weather maps, as Grimsby would noticeably grimace in the background. A few years later Antoine was arrested for committing sexual acts with young girls, and his reputation never recovered. Grimsby seemed to know the truth about Antoine all along. There was just something about Roger Grimsby that got to him. It wasn't that he thought Grimsby was lovable underneath all that gruff, it was that he thought Grimsby was that gruff, and the gruff, itself, was the very source of his fascination. Or, at least, that was what he reckoned the reason was for his liking Roger Grimsby so much, many years later, after he had been in therapy for a while. But, it was never for depression, which some people thought it was for.

If there was ever a more aptly named human being than Roger Grimsby it was Eliot Glee. Eliot was a young man when he first started watching *Eyewitness News*, and recalled the first time he ever saw Roger Grimsby read the news. There was nothing memorable about the news that night, except that it was different, because Roger Grimsby was now reading it. Imagine the difference between seeing the world through the eyes of a frail, white dove, who could swoop high and low through the convection of air, and then seeing it through the eyes of a large, slow-moving grouper at the bottom of a dirty bay. The grouper was Roger Grimsby, and the view from below was all his, and all fascinating. This, Eliot Glee first saw the world from a different vantage than his own. At the age of sixteen, in 1973, he formed the first, last, and only *Roger Grimsby Worldwide Fan Club, Inc.* Although he had never formally sought to incorporate he thought the *Inc.* at the end of his club's name made it sound all the more serious and professional. Eliot elected himself President, Vice President, and Treasurer. There was only one other member of the club- an honorary member, and that was Grimsby, himself. He was informed of this unsurpassing honor, in March of 1975, via a letter addressed to the Eyewitness Newsroom. He wrote back to Eliot a thank you letter that said this:

Dear Mr. Glee:

Thank you for your kindly initiation of a fan club in my honor. I cannot say that I am honored, however, to be a part of it, as that seems something more in accordance with the narcissism that Howard Cosell

engages in. However, as a token of my appreciation I enclose with this letter an *Eyewitness News* mug for you to use as you see fit. My mother uses hers to store her dentures in, but I do not recommend this be necessarily the path that you follow in the great adventure that awaits both of you. Thank you for your viewership and good luck in the military.

In Appreciation,  
Roger Grimsby

The reason for the tone and direction of Grimsby's thank you note was because Eliot had written him that he had volunteered to serve in the Army, even though the war in Vietnam was practically over. What Grimsby did not know was that Eliot was never called to duty because his low IQ had disqualified him from service. That and the fact that he had a heart murmur had made him 4-F. But, he still was proud of the fact that he had been willing, if unable, to serve.

With that disappointment put behind him, Eliot was looking for direction, himself. He decided that if he could not follow in the footsteps of his father, and serve his country, as his father had in the Second World War, he would become a journalist like his idol, Grimsby. Of course, that never panned out- not for any lack of will on his part. Eliot decided that he would start out as a 'cub' reporter, like Jimmy Olson from the old *Superman* tv show. But, no one would hire him, as he had never graduated from high school. So Eliot decided that he would research all that he could about Roger Grimsby. He had decided that he would write an autobiography of Grimsby. If he couldn't be like Grimsby, he would celebrate all that was good about a man like Grimsby. That idea was dashed when he found out that, technically, only Grimsby could write his autobiography. So, instead of attempting to write an autobiography he decided that he would actively recruit members for the *Roger Grimsby Worldwide Fan Club, Inc.* He finally convinced three other members to join Grimsby and himself.

There was Todd Stiles- the boy he met at the Learning Center, where people like Eliot were given 'special treatment'. Todd had never been a fan of Grimsby, preferring the Channel 4 news team, but he did like Roseanne Scamardella, and when Eliot promised him he could get Roseanne Scamardella's autograph if he joined the club he did. There were several weeks of tension between the two boys until Eliot decided to get his mother

to fake Scamardella's signature on a napkin. Todd never knew that he had been deceived, yet he was never an enthusiastic member of the club, either. Then there was Mrs. Castiglione- who lived in the apartment across the hall from Eliot's family. She was, perhaps, the only woman in all of New York City who considered Roger Grimsby sexy, and certainly the only one who would have preferred Grimsby, rather than Beutel, to 'park his loafers' under her bed, as she would say. Loafers, slippers....what was it about parking footwear that so excited women, he thought? The third devotee that he was able to lure into his circle was his own mother, Susanna Glee, a former lounge singer who had gotten pregnant with Eliot after a one night stand with a traveling salesman. While his origins were quite clichéd Eliot was determined that his future would not be. Besides, his dad had always been his 'real' dad, not the guy who had gotten his mom pregnant. It was his dad, after all, that had been happier at his birth than at Richard Nixon's political demise, not the guy who got his mom pregnant and left.

But the key to all of it was Roger Grimsby. He would track down his hero and find out the secret to his success, in person. The first order of business was actually meeting Grimsby. He knew where the Eyewitness Newsroom was located, in Manhattan, and knew that many of the people who worked there met at *Cecil's Tavern* between the six and eleven o'clock newscasts. So, that's where he would wait, and then conduct his interviews. When he walked into the bar Mel, the bartender, told him that an underaged kid could not be served alcohol. Eliot told him that he was not there to drink, but was waiting to meet Roger Grimsby, and had heard that the newsman often came here to unwind. Mel said that was true and that he often had long talks with Grimsby. Eliot asked him all about their conversations, but Mel, at first seemed hesitant to reveal the nature of the talks.

Eliot then told him that he was Grimsby's nephew. He had seen enough episodes of *McCloud* and *Columbo* to know that such claims always seemed to work. And it did, even though Mel knew it was a lie, so only told the boy fanciful tales, designed to burnish the Grimsby legend. At about 7:40 pm Bill Beutel and Roger Grimsby walked into a bar and took a booth in the corner. The men seemed to be genuinely friendly, which surprised Eliot, for he always imagined Grimsby must have resented the fact that Beutel was the more popular of the two anchormen. Yet, this was what he had been waiting for. But, he needed to get Grimsby alone. Beutel's life held no interest to him, although he suspected he could curry favor with his mother were he to

get Beutel's autograph. But, that was a secondary objective. First, he had to get the scoop on Grimsby. For nearly 30 minutes the two news anchors, clearly on friendly terms, seemed engaged in a typical round of drinking, male bullshit, and dinner. At about a quarter after eight Beutel got up and headed toward the men's restroom. Here was Eliot's chance. He zoomed over to the table and introduced himself to his hero.

Grimsby was not impressed, and never stopped from shoving food into his mouth, and did not greet Eliot's extension of his hand with his own. He merely looked up rather glumly at the teenager and asked what he wanted from him. Eliot explained that he was the founder and president of the *Roger Grimsby Worldwide Fan Club, Inc.* Grimsby did not seem impressed. He did not even recognize that such an entity existed, much less his being twenty percent of its membership roll. Then Eliot reminded him of the *Eyewitness News* mug he had sent, and the fact that he had wished him good luck in his military career. Not wanting to be rude, Grimsby decided to play along, and asked how the service was. Not wanting to admit his own failure Eliot decided a white lie was in order, and claimed that things were going swell, that he was having fun going to war. Grimsby forced a smile, and rolled his eyes, and as Bill Beutel returned from the restroom Grimsby told him that the two men had important things to discuss regarding tonight's eleven o'clock broadcast. Eliot said he understood, then asked Grimsby for his autograph. Grimsby grudgingly obliged and Eliot left the bar in a state of happiness, until he realized he forgot to ask Beutel for his autograph, for his mother, in the joy of having another Roger Grimsby collectible. As he left the bar he noticed that a tow truck was getting ready to take away a car in the parking lot. At first he did not pay much attention to it, for that was someone else's problem and he'd long ago learned to mind his own business. Then he saw that the car had the words *Eyewitness News* in the lower right of its rear windshield, and its license plate read GRIM 77.

No, it couldn't be. But, it had to be Grimsby's car. How could a tow truck want to tow away the car of Roger Grimsby? Eliot rushed up to the tow truck driver, who was hooking up the chains to take away the car. The paranoid driver floored Eliot with a karate chop and warned him, 'Fuck you, buddy. You were illegally parked, and your car's going bye-bye.'

Eliot said, 'No, no. That's not my car. I'm not even old enough to drive. See what it says in the window? And look at the license plate. That car belongs to the tv news reporter Roger Grimsby- you know, Channel 7, *Eyewitness*

News?’

‘Da fuck do I care whose car it is? It’s illegally parked, and it’s going wit’ me. And if you try to stop me I’ll knock you on your ass again, punk.’

At that, Eliot ran back in to the bar, screaming that Roger Grimsby’s car was ‘being stolen from the lot’. This caused a commotion, as both Grimsby and Beutel, and a dozen or so people looking to see some tension, followed Eliot out to the parking lot, where the *Eyewitness News* car was already up on the truck. Grimsby protested that his car was not in any violation, and the tow truck driver told him to fuck off. Grimsby tried bargaining with the driver, asking if he could just pay whatever fee they charged up front, and have the car let down.

For a moment the driver seemed to have a pang of conscience, and perhaps keep a bit of the fee himself. Then, he recognized who he was dealing with.

‘Wait a fuckin’ minute, you’re Roger Fuckin’ Grimsby- the news guy, on Channel 7.’

Thinking that his celebrity was working to his advantage Grimsby said, ‘Yes. Yes, I am. I am Roger Grimsby.’

‘I thought it was you,’ said the driver. ‘Well, you can suck my big, fat, hairy Eye-talian balls, motherfucker. You fuckers did a story last year about my cousin Ernie and some housing violations on his property. He did forty-five days in County, you cocksucker. You want your fuckin’ car, you’ll have to come to 122<sup>nd</sup> Street to claim it.’

Grimsby pleaded with the driver to be reasonable, that he was just doing his job as a reporter and that it was nothing personal against his family, and to just let him pay whatever towing fee here, and let the whole thing drop.

To that proposal the tow truck driver- a big, fat, hairy Italian guy- said, ‘Eat my asshole, Grimsby!’ Then he stuck out his middle finger as he got in his cab.

As the driver drove away with the car Grimsby started muttering some curses, as the crowd jeered the driver, and sided with Grimsby. They started chanting, ‘**Tow scum! Tow scum!**’ as the truck and car turned a corner.

Grimsby was furious, and he told Beutel that he was going to launch a personal investigation into the wholesale corruption of the automobile towing business, declaring it a racket, and legalized thievery. Only the official Parking Violations Bureau was nearly as bad. These people were organized criminals- no better than the Mafia, and Grimsby suspected that there was a connection between the two, but already knew that many of the tow truck

drivers were ex-cons with long records. Beutel offered to have the station pick the two men up and drive them back to the studio, from where Grimsby could get the cash needed to release his car. Grimsby refused, saying he had enough money for the \$45 fee. Besides, a walk in the evening would cool him off, so that he would not explode with rage once he arrived at the tow lot.

So, the two anchormen went their separate ways, with Beutel opting to walk the ten or so blocks back to the studio, while Grimsby determined to walk the twenty-five or thirty blocks to the lot by himself. He had not counted on the companionship of his greatest fan, Eliot Glee, who could not help but tag along, sensing that this evening would make a good chapter in his planned book on Grimsby.

Along the way, Eliot started asking Grimsby all about the news business and what his life was like, especially on what it was like to be a newsman. Grimsby was not enthused about his company, but felt sorry for the boy, as well as grateful for his warning him of his car being towed. Lots of times cars are towed not by legitimate towing services, but plain old car thieves posing as towing services. But, he had heard things about this particular towing company before, and while legitimate, they were known for being nasty.

Eliot asked Grimsby about the other people at *Eyewitness News*, and if it was true that he was in love with Rona Barrett. Grimsby shot him a look, shivered visibly, and said, 'Don't you mean Rona Rooter? She's a real bitch.' Eliot did not understand the contempt in Grimsby's voice for the reporter who reported on what he considered fluff celebrity gossip. But, he soon learned that Roger Grimsby was always Roger Grimsby, for better or worse.

As they continued walking Eliot told Grimsby about his family, and never knowing his birth father, and being adopted by his 'dad'. Perhaps it was the depth of love he could sense in Eliot's voice for his dad that got to Grimsby, but for the first time that evening he did not wish Eliot to simply be struck down by an act of God. For the first time in their brief congress, Grimsby's ears actually perked up, and there was a softness in his voice, as he was actually listening to the words that Eliot spoke, not merely their gist. Grimsby, too, was an adopted child, and had once searched for his natural family. Perhaps it was the only thing that Roger Grimsby and Eliot Glee had in common, but it was enough to make the long trek to the towing lot bearable, at least for Grimsby.

They soon arrived at the tow lot, and in the back of the lot he could see that a boot had been attached to his back right tire. The driver, aka Tow Scum,

saw Grimsby and Eliot, and motioned toward his genitals, 'Hey Grimsby-suck my cock you queer old fucker!' Grimsby ignored the ass, and walked inside to where he saw a very old man behind the counter.

'Hello, I'm here to retrieve my car. It was illegally towed by one of your drivers.'

'Izzat so?' said the old man. He was typical of the arrogant losers who were employed in this industry. Like repo men, they had no real success in their lives, so got off on their brief moments of power, counterpoised against the barren gray of the rest of their existences.

'That's so, but, regardless, I just want to pay the fee and be on my way. I haven't the time to argue.'

'What say you your car's make and license plate?'

Grimsby gave him a series of related information on the car, but the old man said he had no such paperwork. Grimsby was getting angrier when, just then, Tow Scum walked in. He said, 'Hey Larry, I've got this asshole's paperwork.'

'Ok, lemme have it.'

Tow Scum gave Larry the paperwork and he said to Grimsby, 'Well, that'll be \$75.'

'What?' roared Grimsby.

'\$75, I said.' said Larry.

'The fine for illegally parked cars in that part of town is \$15. What type of scam are you trying to pull?'

'No scam, but the car was towed over 20 blocks and there's an extra \$20 per every 10 blocks towed fee, plus a \$20 'harassment fee' for the grief you caused Wilbur, there.' referring to Tow Scum.

'That's blatantly illegal!' cried Grimsby.

The old man suddenly changed moods, and got angry, as if he was gonna pull out a gun, or a bat, and go crazy, '***Listen motherfucker! Don't you get angry at me. I'm just doing my job. Pay up, or get the fuck off private property!***'

Grimsby comported himself, then asked to speak to the manager, who was a big fat blond woman in her forties. She looked like she could have been Tow Scum's mother, but Grimsby whispered to Eliot that Tow Scum was probably fucking her, regardless. She was even nastier than Tow Scum and Larry, and her spandex were so tight that you could see her camel toe protruding through her fat denimed crotch.



She said, ‘Motherfucker! If you wanna give my driver a hard time I’m gonna give you a hard time. Now, either pay up or leave.’

At that Grimsby saw a payphone on the wall, and put a dime in it and called the Eyewitness Newsroom to send one of their trucks with a camera down to the tow lot’s location.

The manager looked puzzled, ‘What the fuck are you trying to pull, dickwad?’

‘Nothing. I just called my news crew to come down and I’m going to conduct a thorough investigation of all your business practices. You see, my name is Roger Grimsby. I’m a local anchorman on Channel 7, *Eyewitness News*.’

Eliot just loved it whenever Grimsby would utter the phrase *Eyewitness News*.

At its utterance, the manager seemed to change, and soften. ‘Oh,’ she said, ‘I thought you looked kind of familiar. I mean, I....uh, Wilbur- get your fuckin’ ass over here.’

Tow Scum came running like a servile dog.

The manager barked at him, ‘Did you know that this here gentleman is a fellow from the local news?’

‘Yeah, that cocksucker helped put Bruce in-’

The manager slapped Tow Scum, ‘You fuckin’ idiot! Don’t you realize that Mr. Grimsby, here, was probably working on an important story?’

‘Actually, not,’ said Grimsby, ‘I was just having supper. But, now, in fact, I do have a great story to work on. And you won’t even have to wait till eleven o’clock to know what the lead story’s gonna be.’

At that the manager grimaced. Soon, the *Eyewitness News* team was all over the lot and cops were called. It was determined that Grimsby’s car had, indeed, been illegally towed, and Grimsby’s further investigation, over the next few days, served to put that company out of business inside of three weeks. Eliot was there to watch it all unfold, night after night, and never forgot his being there for a ‘breaking news story’, as it was called. Grimsby kept in touch with Eliot for the next year or so, by letter, but as years passed both he and Eliot found themselves writing less and less, although Grimsby got some national fame by doing a bit part in the movie *The China Syndrome*, and always kept his membership in the *Roger Grimsby Worldwide Fan Club, Inc.*, at least until he died of lung cancer, on June 23<sup>rd</sup>, 1995. He was sixty-six years old, and one of the last visitors to his room at Lennox Hill Hospital was

Eliot Glee. The two men didn't say much, until Eliot said, 'Tow Scum', and Grimsby faintly chuckled.

A brief shaft of light shone struck the heart monitor, momentarily, on the mostly cloudy day, blinding Eliot with colors dancing in his eyes, before he left. That night he heard the news that Grimsby was dead, but was not sad. His eyes replayed the many moments of his hero he could not consciously recall, and those he could, mostly of Grimsby's newscasts, his still unfinished biography of the man, the *Eyewitness News* mug he still proudly used, and the look on the idiots at the tow company's faces when they were exposed-especially Tow Scum's. Roger Grimsby, dead? Never. In such a place what little could a mere tear change?

# Apex Yards

*It was only on perfect days like this that he could remember how the smog felt in his lungs. Mid-sixties, not a cloud in the sky. The bicycle flew under his body and against the wind like a painter's brush moves in mid-idea. Where was the great city of his youth against the clouds that flitted across this perfect rural day? Where was the memory of all that once was aching heavily through his conscious recall? Was it gone into the sign that said that a horse riding school was only a quarter of a mile that away?*

*As he pedaled onward he watched the rhythm of the bicycle's tires' air bob up and down. It was a slight grade uphill, and he knew the best way to defeat it was to lose himself to motion- all that mattered now was pedaling. Pedaling was the answer, the only answer. Pedal....pedal....pedal. There would come a day, he knew, when he would long to remember perfect days like this as briskly and fully as he remembered the smog of childhood. There would be a dismal day when all that was needed was a memory of this day to brighten it. Or so he hoped against hope. Drink the water from his sports bottle. And keep on pedaling.*

*In his four decades on the planet there had been many lesser days- some which stood out not for themselves but for what they contained. He knew that. It was not something he even questioned on an unconscious level. He knew that those days would never be erasable, not even at death. But this day- how does one ensure that a day, or any thing, is remembered? Is it by sheer force of will, or circumstances that arise, unforeseen, uncontrollable? Is it only through trauma, or is joy as big a carver of reality? If so, why are so many songs and books and poems written on despair? As odes to despair? Should he hurl his bike and his body into a ditch, to bring forth pain, to float above the day, or rather outside it? What would be the use, if use were a thing worth debating? In those lesser days of recall he knew what to expect, or expected some things, and some he expected too much of. But, now, with his wife at work, and him finally able to enjoy a rare day of his endless unemployment, he wondered just how quickly things would move. he wondered this now, as he did in his long laying in bed, at*

*night, before he could fall asleep. He strove to not get too out of a regular life rhythm of sleeping and working, even as all his work was that he did about his home.*

*He could envision himself at again as much time from now as this moment was from his birth, and wonder if it would still be as fond a recall? Would the age and desire for dearness make what he smelt now even more fragrant? Would the heat rising off the black pave be as spellbinding as it snaked up into the blue? Yes, there had been many lesser days, but how many like this one- so utterly perfect? Surely, in forty years, over fourteen thousand days, there had been a few dozen, perhaps a hundred days that were as wonderful as this. Where were they? Where had they gone? Why could he not recall them? How he wanted to grasp them firmly and not let them be so fleeting....*

It was less than a week ago he had returned from New York- the old nabe, all the old folk that vaguely recalled him, or rather the little boy he was. They remembered his father fine, but him? He was a ghost. No, he was a myth. There was no surety of his place within them. But, that did not bother him. Why should the lack of recall in people he could barely recall bother him? They had their own lives, as humble and humdrum as they were. They had gone through long, hot, stinking New York summers together, while he had globetrotted, and met different people, in their own regions, and knew that their own version of multiculturalism imported was something akin, but different, from his of going to where all those new New Yorkers were from. This knowledge was worth a smile. It made him rare. He was a perfect day....

....in human form. Not that that bothered him so much, as it merely disturbed him, to know that he could be forgotten. If he, the center of all things, could be forgotten, what else could? Shakespeare's plays? Einstein? *Led Zeppelin's* second album? Was passage the only way to memory? If so, which was likely, need it be so brutal, so total, so merciless? Back in the old nabe, in the few days he was visiting his sister, he took to walking around the old haunts. The streets did not whisper to him, though. This was real life, not a poem. It was also not a movie, so former lovers did not just happen by, with a rekindled romance in the offing. They did not care- not the streets nor the former lovers. At least he was sure the streets were still there, if repaved several times. But, what of his former lovers? As he walked, though, the questions faded to the smog that flavored his recovered lungs, slowly

damaged by his mother's secondhand smoke as he and his sister grew up. No, the streets were without remembrance or pity. Nor did his care extend to them upon such reflection. He had long since tried to bury his past, but it kept doing the zombie thing, like in those films where they rose from their graves to eat the living. He would not let his living present, much less the future, be devoured by what was. There was no point to it. Still, there was no harm in looking at it, from a distance. He passed by his junior high, and a flood of images returned. There was where he dropped a game winning touchdown pass when he and his pals wanted to beat the kids they hated in touch football. There was the wall that he played Chinese handball against. There was the bench where the older, burnout kids would sit, and wait for the pushers to come by, during recess, so they could buy joints. Without realizing it he had passed in and through the schoolyard, and there was still no return, at least any that could be called real. Memories were just that- the dead skin of what was, not the flesh itself. Yet, he longed for the touch of a past flesh- the smell of a girl....and wondered whatever became of the blond girl, whose name was a perfect day, who he had screwed one recess, after they shared a couple of beers. They had snuck up to the roof of the school, five stories high, the highest rooftop for over a mile around, where no one could see them, and they screwed against the orgasmic hum of the school's air conditioner, and he longed to suck her fourteen year old nipples and devour her breasts in one swallow, even as he knew she was just pity fucking him because she had just broken up with her boyfriend, his old friend, whose life and ends were another in an endless procession of perfect days, that seemed to only want to intrude at their behest, not his.

Oh, where had she gone?

He walked by the old police station, now a brownstone with apartments. he remembered that right across the street, really a half block up, there had been that old Italian man's barber shop. He remember one day, getting a haircut, after a long bargaining session with his mother about getting a trim, he was sitting in the chair, and then rapt by the whirr of a police cherry going by, and a crowd of old men blocking his view out the window, and never finding out whether there was a rape, robbery, or a fire or heart attack. There would be the fat cop, who always hung out near the barber shop, and whom he knew from less savory moments, having seen the flatfoot accept graft from Fat Marco, a Mob soldier, who terrorized many people he had once known. That grin, that stoagy, that belly. Fat Marco was another perfect day, almost....

....like the cops. Who he hated worse, the crooks or the cops, who were just as crooked, was a philosophical debate he would have to encounter if he ever wrote of his experiences. That was not now, as he stood in front of the building that was once the police station. There was no return, not for the old drunks from his block, who would spend too many nights in the slammer. There was no return for the birds that used to nest in the maple tree right in front of the police station, for their tree was long since cut down. A gray stump refused the perfection of a day, as it weathered the many imperfect days of its afterdeath. The new station, a few blocks away, had been built on the lot of the supermarket where he had his first on the books job. He was a teenager then, and things were what they were. There were the sexy cashiers he lusted for. There were the sweaty nights unloading the trucks. There were the odd assortment of characters that only could be found in New York- not just in their oddness, but in their number and variety. Then there was the odd assortment of characters that were in himself, at least at one time. They had went away, far away, as he and his body had done, but one remained. It was the fear of cops that was as much a part of him as anything willed by DNA could be. There was that old man some cops beat when....there was the hooker, near Metropolitan Avenue, who that....there was his little friend, whose older brother once said something that a cop didn't like....

He recalled seeing all the old mobsters walking in and out, smiling at kids like him, smiling because they knew they had beaten a system they gamed, smiling because they knew that they were the good guys, smiling because the kids that always gathered on the brownstone stoop of the precinct house expected it of them, and they were showmen, men of the people, who could never let an audience down, so always made sure to be seen tossing coins their way. The kids worshipped the gangsters because they had power, they had attention, they had a way with reality that the cops never had- call it style, but it did not matter. He wondered what new gangsters there were. They were probably more vicious and successful than those from his day, because now since the War On Drugs was officially over, due to the War On Terror, mobsters would have a far easier time with the law off their backs. But, none of that mattered then. The gangsters were cheered on because there was little else to root for, save a full belly. But, full bellies lacked panache.

Then there was the new police station, built on the lot where the old supermarket he worked in was. As he got close to it his stomach turned. It was visceral. It was something that he could not control. There was too much

there- lost hopes were just a part of it. As a poor kid he and all his friends had grown up fearing the cops, for he knew that any people that they considered 'unworthy', for whatever reason, were not worthy of protection, much less basic fair treatment, and the sensation still struck him, at the most inopportune moments. If he were driving, and heard a siren- be it cop, fire truck or ambulance- a part of him would tense up. Once, when on a highway, he almost skidded off the road when he heard an ambulance siren coming toward him, in the other direction. As he caught his breath the sweat on his brow was cold, colder than anything a human body should shed. He recalled being beaten by cops when he was seven, and he had tried to stop a cop- that big ugly one with the handle bar mustache- from beating one of the 'ladies' he and his friends did business with. No tightness of a fetal crouch could prevent the thwacking against his shins and thighs. No balling up of self could prevent the scars and bruises from emerging.

But, on his return to the old nabe, that was all in the past. He had spent too many years destroying those bits of himself, as if a hunter, or sniper who took out every target that came into range, but raged that so few did. He made his way to Apex Yards. Perhaps that was why he actually returned- to come here. How his feet had made their way there he was not certain. But he was there. He had, indeed, come back to his old stomping grounds not to see his sister, but for that one reason. It had to be. It made sense....sense disguised as a perfect day. Apex Yards was where he conducted business, as a teenaged hustler, with many of the local mobsters and drug dealers who did business in the nabe. He had walked its docks during downpours, and even learnt to first drive a forklift there, working for *DelVecchio's Meat Mart*. Of course, it was always just a front for drug money, but he was clean. He'd never done anything illegal. But, he remembered the time Sal Pescatori- the foreman- was shot on the dock, in front of the crew, by some guys in a car with tinted windows. They were after the owner, Old Man DelVecchio, and when the boss came out and assured them that 'nothing happened', and to get back to work, that they would get a doctor, 'it's just a flesh wound', he knew that he lived in a special place and a special time. There would be times in the long centuries from now that such scenes would be the stuff of just books and films. But, here, or rather there, and then, it was real, no matter how much he wanted it to not be. What a wonder. He wondered, was such a power to make perfect days appear from the ordinary just a thing of the past? Yet, that was what was so wonderful- that the ordinary existed side by side with the

perfect, at least then.

There was still a love for the old Apex Yards complex, though, that would be with him until death. However, Apex Yards was no longer. Death had gotten to it before him. The steel and concrete world that was the old complex was far more fragile than his blood, sweat, and fears. So said his sister on the telephone, for her Christmas call. It seemed the old complex was torn down, a few months before, to make way for a mall. He wanted to scream to her, ‘Why didn’t you tell me this earlier?’, but his sister knew little of his misadventures there. Although they grew up in the same home their lives never crossed, at least not in substantive ways. There was a hidden world that his sister knew little of, a haunted tune that only an industrial yards’ whistle can fully make real music from. But, now, Apex Yards was going to be a mall- a place to sell, not make, things. As if there were not enough of them in this world. There was something wrong with the universe, he knew, upon first getting the news. This was what drew him homeward, not the seeking of perfection, but the recapturing of the old and imperfect, just to know it was, before it paved over or torn down, but he was too late, as he had often been. Now, as he walked toward the most hallowed of his stomping grounds, along the rigid steel tracks that he had once marveled over the smoothness of to his feel, he saw only bright lights, like some sunrise out of nightmare, where once a three hundred foot high smokestack rose, where once men who chose not to know too much sweated, where paychecks from many of those same men were poured back into the hands of the men who profited from what they lacked, knowing lack was good for business, and business was the reason for the yards. When he was a kid he remembered listening to *The Yardbirds’* tune *Smokestack Lightning*, as he worked on the docks. It was an anthem of sorts, however pallid, for it was pure.

There was also something pure about the filth. It left its mark, like acid rain, perhaps- but it mattered. What is a thing that makes no impression? What is a love that grows no pain? The lights, though, the lights were too much- they were garish, they were not day, they were not clean in their scour. They were smug, domineering, pornographic. They were the herald of men whose vision of life was as base, or more so, than those men whose world he ran away from. Who would ever feel such a way about a *Dairy Queen* or *Orange Julius* the way he did about a grease-tinged old loading dock? Did the world need another *Waldenbooks* or *Wal-Mart* more than it did a beautiful smokestack? He could see that major parts of the mall still needed to be built, while other



parts were open for business. He could smell a pizzeria from over a mile away. He knew that there was a *Home Depot* inside? Ah, tools. The opiate of the masculine sex. He had gone the back way to the yards- the railroad tracks. He loved the railroad tracks- they were unchanging, and haunted his dreams.

He had had the same dream over and over for many years. He was in upstate New York, near the Quebec border, and had followed these same tracks that went by the yards, up the several hundred miles to the border. He could see the border, even though it was only a gesture of the mind that sought to placate him. What lay across it he did not know, but the tracks kept going, perhaps to the North Pole? But, he never even went as far as the border. He had circumscribed his world to dream, and the dream would not give- there would be no to and fro inside of him. At least not willingly. And when he was frustrated by its rigidity he found that he had lowered his ear to the steel, but it was dead. There was no hum. The yards had long been cut off from any trains. It had all changed. But, there was something solid, unchanging, about the yards then. There were times, however rare, when back then he could put his grip on the steel rails and feel the life of the yet undead still gasping, still imperfect. And that was him, that was what he knew, that was not now. The quiver of old voices thrummed through the steel, but when he had bent down this time, there was a coldness far beyond cold. It was a harder death to deal with than that which was in a thing once living- at least in ways that most men are familiar with.

He passed by a parked car, then another, and another. They were things of steel, but they were still alive, gave off scents, gave off the very fact of their living to any who would care to know. Lights intensified, and people would pass him. But, they were not people any longer. They were merely the not yet dead. He was as if a traveler from the future come to survey the past as it happened. It may as well have been that way, because that was the only way to make sense of missing that which was still here. The dead hidden under the laughs and flirtations of women whose bodies bent with emotion and churned with possibilities. Not so, the mall, still to be built. There was only life awaiting, but it would never be the life of the yards. There was a carnival quality to the yards that mocked and spat upon the blood of the dead, and those who had killed them- it. Where was the animality of it all? It was all a low hum by comparison. A French poodle passed by, and he restrained a tear, because it had once been a wolf, capable of death, while now it was a grotesque parody of an unloving undead place where no one of substance

was. There was just light. And there was nothing he could do, not a damned thing but take it all in, and force a smile to let those who floated by know that he was a vaguely related being. Before he realized what had happened he was almost done with a *Choco-Cherry Blizzard* at the *Dairy Queen*. Like that, time can bend. In the booth ahead of him he saw a little three or four year old blond girl stand up, turn around, and wave at him. His mother was a fat white trasher, but he prayed that she would grow up attractive, smart, slim, and with a hunger beyond ice cream. He smiled as she smiled. There was hope, or at least its hope. This child would never know a realer life than this, he thought.

Then, he snapped out of it. The same had been said by many generations before him, all at their passing between the old and new worlds they were unfamiliar with. He was not a sentimentalist. Fuck it all, he said, until the little girl shook her head and told him that was a bad word he'd just spoken. The chocolate smear on the girl's cheek matched the color of his *Choco-Cherry Blizzard*, and as he looked past her, and out into the night sky he saw that it was too dark now. He would not see the monster in its birthing, at least not fully. There were too many unnatural lights that bled out the pure night.

He left the mall and the *Dairy Queen* behind, the little girl nothing short of a perfect day, and headed toward the lights, where he saw some workmen, probably working overtime, putting the finishing touches on the cinder block wall they were building. It was probably gonna be a hair salon or a dollar store, or the like. There would not be an original thing in the whole mall. Then, he wondered what the bricklayer was thinking, the old fat Mexican guy, just over there? And he wondered if this man thought about all the bricks and blocks he cemented into place- not just here, but in his whole life. Did he wonder if they'd be around in a hundred, much less a thousand years? He knew he wouldn't. Or did, he resolve that each wall, each brick, each block was a perfect day, held together by the mixture of other people's sweat, toil, and ultimate passing? Did he love forgetting those days, so that they became the real by virtue of their ordinariness? And what of the other, bigger buildings, downtown? What futures would they see, then crumble into?

Nights like this may not have been perfect days, but they could be passed just as easily. Then, it struck him. He remembered where he was. He was under the light that was opposite the great elm across the tracks. There it was. The light barely illuminated it. It was still going strong, and the light still burned. But, there was a gray quality to it that seemed apropos of the mood he was in. He forgot about the bricklayer, as he was never thought of in

return, and remembered Scott Sorenson. Scott was a friend of his who was killed when sixteen, during a botched coke sale. He had been shot by a Puerto Rican gangster who was too perfect a day to be punished. This was where Scott had bled to death in the forty-nine minutes it took for 911 to get an ambulance there. Now, it was to be another bridal shop, or a *Gap*, or the like....

*Was that why he clutched his handlebars so tightly? And did Scott see what was coming and decide to avoid it all? The bricklayer shouted to a co-worker, and their shift, it seemed, was over, and gathered his site lines and tape. As he left the mall behind and neared what was once his home, a block or two away, the day that he vowed to remember was already slipping. How could that be? What was this cruel creature that perfection was? Some clouds appeared out west. Then, with the construction lights going out, there was no variation, if there had really ever been any. He knew that thunderstorms were forecast for the evening. He was home, his real home, far away from the old nabe, and a bit winded by it all. As he pulled up his driveway on his bike he found it difficult to breathe, but managed. Was it age or smog? Did it matter?*

# The Mayor Of Maspeth

In my thirty-two years on the planet I've learned a few things in life, especially about New York City, my hometown. The first is that this city is filled to the gills with nobodies. Now, to the uninitiated it may see that wannabes and losers and has-beens abound, but that's to an untrained eye. And this is not to deny that such souls exist- they do. Let me elaborate, though. For instance, you go to some big game hunter and ask him about some animal he's tracking, and he can tell you about not just elephants nor rhinos in general, but on individual elephants and individual rhinos. I mean, he can tell you the name of the animal, what its life history is, and if the damned things were ever allowed *American Express* cards, he could probably come at you with their full credit history, and whether or not a particular damned rhino could afford to pay for that pickup truck he's had his eye on, you see? I mean, this hunter is so good at what he does that he can look at a heap of elephant dung and tell you what that baby's been eating, and where he got his food- whether it was in this valley or by that river or cheap at *Mel's Meat Mart*. It's amazing, quite frankly, but it's true, all true. Now, to folks like you and me it's just an elephant, big and gray, and all of them look and sound and smell alike, and we know where they live- *at the goddamn zoo!* Hell, unless we even looked at who our guide was, an Indian or a black guy, we probably couldn't even be able to tell what species of elephant we were looking at, much less that this one was named Herbert and that one Norman, *ok?* And this is something that is supposedly engrained in the human nature- an ability to separate individuals from a crowd. Of course, nature and evolution have made it much easier to do so in our own kind than with animals because all human beings' faces are different- even identical twins. But a rhino- well, they all look alike, you know? A tusk is a tusk is a tusk, as Gertrude Stein might've said.

Well, it's that way with New Yorkers, too- at least to fellow New Yorkers. I mean, in that they all seem alike to an outsider. But, just like someone from London, England can tell you the very street an individual Londoner is from, well, a New Yorker can tell much about another one, although the limeys got us beat in that down to the street detail. But, while your average Londoner may be able to be parsed via their lingo, the average New Yorker is separated by a much finer grain of scale- his or her nobodiness: the degree to which that

person, were they to die, would have little or no effect on the rest of the city, state, or universe at large. Now, don't take this as my diminishing the worth of any person's human life. On the contrary, I value the life of even the lowliest bum, but I'm also a realist, and some whiskeyhound warming up on a cellar grate just ain't as important as a Doctor Schweitzer or Winston Churchill was, or even that lady who lived with the apes, or some great writer or thinker. This is a fact, and to deny it may make you feel like a bighearted person, but it also makes you a fool. This is truth at its most bedrock. And another truth is that, despite their nobody status, even nobodies can be sorted into their own constituencies.

All the losers and wannabes, and all the rest of those that I have mentioned? Well, they are just *types* of nobodies. A nobody, to be technical, is a genus, while a loser or a has-been is a species, see? Linnaeus isn't the only one who can figure these sorts of things out. For example, there may be a loser who is not exactly like another loser as well. One might be a *nobody loser \*boozer*, while another is a *nobody loser \*racist*, see? I spent a goodly amount of time figurin' all this out, and the technicalities can be enormous, so save yourself some time and aggravation, and just take my word for it. And let me be honest- New York is certainly not the only place in the country nor world with nobodies, it's just that we got the most, and, by far, the greatest variety. I mean, there are nobodies that live on Park Avenue, and Forest Hills, and other ritzy places like that. In a sense, it's like a magazine article I read about how the Amazon River basin is the most diverse biosphere on the planet. More species of plants and animals can be found in a square acre of the rain forest than can be found on whole other continents. It's amazing. And New York is that way when it comes to nobodies. It's like the Amazon of nobodies. I don't know what it is, but there's a reason novelists and poets alike write about this town, I guess. And, again, to just show I am not being biased toward my hometown, there are great nobodies in cities like Detroit, just ask my cousin Muzzy, who is both a member of that group, and the reigning expert on them, or even in St. Louis, or Albuquerque, but the plain fact is that the New York nobody is the grandest nobody in a world teeming with nobodies. It's perhaps a proof of evolution that is almost irrefutable- *take that William Jennings Bryan!* And, perhaps the kings of all New York nobodies are the Mayors.

No, I ain't talking about someone like Mayor LaGuardia, or Wagner, or Lindsay, or Koch, or even Dinkins- after all, he's the first black guy to ever

sit in Gracie Hall, and he likes tennis and all, like I do. I seen him over at Flushing Meadows last year trying to admire Steffi Graf's ass without being too obvious about it, and campaigning with Bill Clinton this past fall, at a rally. The guy dresses to the nines every time- he's what they call an *arriviste*, a Negro with spats, see? But that ain't the sort of Mayor I mean. The kind of Mayor I mean is- well, the kind of nobody that everybody in a nabe knows, but also the kind of a nobody that's nothing unless he's got an audience to be a nobody in front of. Get it? The better the audience that a Mayor has hooked the greater the nobody he becomes. And, because of this fact, people go up to him for advice, or directions, even though he's a nobody. It also makes lesser nobodies feel more secure in their delusions that they're not nobodies, even though they are, to know that there are supernobodies abounding. So, the Mayors, when not scrounging through garbage cans, become the equivalent of the old shamans that dominated hunter-gatherer tribes. It can be argued, I think, that the very first class of nobodies in human history were, indeed, the shamans, fakirs, and medicine men. I mean, these guys were just leeches on the rest of the tribe, but they got on due to the others' insecurities that they couldn't be hunters and might end up a shaman. I know this might be a controversial opinion to stake out, but I believe it. I'm too smart not to. But, back to the New York City Mayors of each nabe. Did'ja ever see that terrible movie, from a couple of years back, *Do The Right Thing*? You know, the one by Spike Lee- old Mars Blackmon himself? That guy, if he didn't make bad movies, would certainly be in the running for a Mayoralty of a nabe. I mean, he's a fine example of a nobody who's cashed in big time on his nobodiness. Well, in that film there was an old black guy- I think Ossie Davis, who was the Mayor of that nabe that they shot in- I think it was Bed-Stuy or Bushwick. Anyway, that's the kind of Mayor I mean, one of those fabulously ridiculous New York nobodies that all the rest of the nobodies accord some inordinate amount of respect or something to for no discernible reason, save that they may be old, or wacky, or just plain crazy. It all goes back to the shamanic thing, though, I'm telling you.

Anyway, in the nabe where I live, Maspeth, which is a sort of blighted industrial nabe that borders along some of the filthiest water on the planet- and I mean worse than Chernobyl, where they had that nuclear accident, or even that place in India, name I forget, where *Union-Carbide* screwed things up- the infamous Newtown Creek, and its filthiest tributary, the Maspeth

Creek, there is this old bum who used to be a doorman many years ago. His name is Peter Crooms. I knew him from way back, when I was a little boy, and he worked as a doorman at some fancy apartment building downtown. He would always be dressed up when he worked, and I remember thinking he was an airplane pilot, or some general in the Army. And he had a certain air about him, like he was, even then, consciously fighting against the inner nobody that was trying to get out and take over his life. I can't explain it, except that it's like this kid I knew who died of Lou Gehrig's Disease before his twelfth birthday. He knew he was gonna die young, but he always resented it, even though he never spoke of it. His body just had a way of stiffening in defiance of his fate. *Does that make sense?* Anyway, he was a nobody, of course, but when you die young you sort of get an exemption from full nobodihood. This wasn't the case with Crooms, though. He was a nobody in full flower, then a long wilt. Yet he was different from all the other nobodies in the nabe because of his skin color.

And, of course, he wasn't allowed to live in the building where he worked because of his skin color- he's black, you see, but that never stopped him from dressing to the nines, just like Mayor Dinkins does now. And not many blacks lived in Maspeth neither, but, as he was a nobody who was not a threat, he was tolerated by the other, whiter nobodies, who sort of like having black nobodies around, to boost their egos, as long as they can easily outnumber them. It's funny, in a sense, but the poorer the white nobodies are the angrier they seem to get over black folks- nobodies or not. I mean, Old Crooms lived in this shit little basement apartment, that always had water problems- some of the foulest, rustiest New York water you can imagine, and for many years me and some of my friends- future nobodies all- would hang out with him. I mean, we didn't like niggers, generally, as we called them back then, well before my days of cultural enlightenment, and almost ability to dash my nobodiness, but Crooms was not a nigger to us, just an old man- you know how it is. *Niggers* are always *other* black people. The blacks you know are Mrs. Harris, or Miss Lillian or Dago Dante or a budding Mayor, like Old Crooms. Of course, if you were pissed off at them for some reason, they would revert to niggerhood, almost instantaneously. This was the danger of dark skin. But this sort of alchemy was all too predictable and said far more about the white nobodies who stirred that pot than the black nobodies they branded, only to be retracted when guilt, or a later, happier incident wiped the alchemical incident from their vacuous little white brains. As for

Crooms, what was not to like? He didn't mind if we helped ourselves to his ample liquor cabinet, and it was him who taught us many card tricks, even three card monte, and how to work all the angles at craps and other games of chance. One time, we even went on a bus with him, down to visit some of his old black pals who lived in Bushwick, and we saw a cockfight, like something out of *Huckleberry Finn*, or something. The cockfighters were all, of course, nobodies- but damn colorful, and I have to say that the dumb birds, with their metal studs, had to be the nobodiest birds I ever witnessed. Dumb feathered shits that made me have a new respect for the reigning kings of New York birdly nobodinesss- the foul shit-bombing pigeons. Damn, those cockfights were nasty- to see all those birds tear each other to shreds, and all the altacocker men of color scream like apes- sadistic nobodies to their very cores, all wishing the birds were rich, white men. Of course, our parents never knew about such an adventure, and the others, and this was why Crooms was a valuable asset to our budding man- and nobodihoods. And as long as Crooms was the only colored in the nabe things were alright, with all the other white nobodies, and when he retired from his manning of the hotel doors, a few years back, people started to actually notice him, for a change. In fact, I think that there were nobodies who actually finally noticed Crooms was black! Leave it to a nobody white racist to come up to you and say, 'Hey, did you know there was a colored fella that lived over in that apartment building?' *Fuckin' nobody!* That said, I do think Crooms lost a bit of his mind, after retirement, though, because he must have invested too much of himself into his position- always a dangerous life choice. We would see him scrounging through dumpsters and garbage cans, as if he was homeless, but he wasn't. It was odd, and just about then that folks started calling him Mayor, an appellation which he seemed to like. They called him that because it seemed natural, especially now that most of the neighbors actually noticed he was colored, and needed a way to separate him from, say, D'Angelo, the old Italian fella who sleeps in the doorways to local shops. He's just D'Angelo to them, one of any number of white bums/nobodies, but Crooms was Mayor- not only of bums/nobodies, but of all of Maspeth. I guess after seventy or so years of having to yessir and kiss ass all your life to better dressed nobodies you just get kind of tired of it, and even if people are just giving you a title in jest, or as a way to say *nigger* without having to say the word, while shining you on, it's only natural that you'd want to take to it, the title- I mean, embrace it, flaunt it, like your Inner Child, or some other



bullshit like you might hear on the Oprah Winfrey Show.

Besides, it's not like there was anything wrong in shining an old man on. Anyhow, that's how Old Crooms came to be known as The Mayor Of Maspeth, or just Mayor to his friends and intimates, like me and my pals. But, make no mistake about it, Crooms was still a nobody, just a nobody with a fancy title, and if you asked the others in the nabe, he was still one of the lowest of the nobodies- a black nobody. I think it was about a year or so after he retired as a doorman that me and my pal, Trey Willis, started getting involved in some minor dealing. You know, shooting some smack, doing some lines, pretending we were all the shit, like some big time dealers from Colombia, like Pablo Escobar or someone. After all, back then crack was still all the rage, and we just had to be different than being run of the mill nobodies-in-training. Of course, this very desire to be different meant we weren't, it strongly proved we *were* just generic nobodies, because everyone was doing the same shit to be different. It's like those teenaged kids you still see, nowadays, with the wild colored Mohawks. I mean, can anyone really tell them apart? No. They're just punk nobodies.

But, back then, that's when my girlfriend and I were really going wild. Luxy Sanders was her name- a rail thin blond, with sizable knockers I loved to suck on, who lived to shoot up. I knew she was trouble, from Day One, but as a charter member of the nobody brigade myself, I didn't dump her, because she was an evil demon in the sack- she fucked like no other chick I've done before or since. I wonder, sometimes, what ever became of her? Not that I loved her, really, but Luxy was something else. But, back then, almost ten years ago- I been clean and straight ever since, for reasons that have nothing to do with Crooms- we would fuck and shoot up and pig out on chips and beer for two or three straight days- time was like a carousel, and we chose whether or not we wanted to ride, see? Once, when we were high, I even let Trey fuck Luxy. I remember watching them and getting pissed off, wondering if I was dreaming all this or not. Then I wondered why it was so easy for Trey to let me allow him to fuck her, and why she so eagerly agreed to it. I mean, were they fuckin' behind my back, even then? And she seemed to enjoy it with him more, and groan louder, and tear at his back more. I wanted to kill them both, right then and there- then the moment passed, when he shot his load. I remember Luxy sucking his dick dry. I mean, doing his dick as it tasted of both of them, then turning around, all naked, coming after me, with her tongue hung out like Gene Simmons from *KISS*, and Frenching

me, and my tasting his and her snowball. I mean, dirty needles, smack, and all were nothing. To a junky that's just the fee for the show. But, to taste your best friend's cum, after he's blasted your chick, and with her snizz mixed in? That was so nasty, and in retrospect, I think it was the beginning of the end for me and 'Sexy Luxy', as I called her. Not that I ever thought she'd end up Mrs. Rogers, or nothing.

But, back to Crooms. He found out about our habit, or mine- since I was the only one of the three of us he cared about, and sat me down one day and told me about this guy he worked with, the last year before he retired, a young Puerto Rican kid, who worked the swing shift, and took over his morning shift when he retired. It seems this kid had been hard on in a gang of drug dealers that were really fly in the late '70s and early '80s. I forget the name of this gang, but they ruled some park down in Southern Queens, and all over East New York. Anyway, this kid had been a bit of a player, or so he claimed, and still thought he was, even though he had bird-dogged his ass out of that scene when he was mistaken for some other kid who had squealed, or was thought to have. In short, he was about as 'in' as I was to the big boys. But, Crooms liked this kid, although it turned out that the kid was a junky, too, far worse than me or Luxy ever were, and had been referred to the doorman's job by one of them Outreach programs that waste money trying to make better quality nobodies- as if there was any real need for that. Who knows what the real story was? But, he admired Crooms, because even though Crooms was just a doorman, he was the most important person in that building. He knew everyone's secrets and everyone's business, had keys to everyone's apartments when, inevitably, someone would lock themselves out, or lose their keys, and for that reason Crooms thought he was superior to all the rich white nobodies who would pass him and say *hi* or *bye* to him. And all of them would call him *Peter*, even children, but he had to call the tenants Mister or Miss or Missus or Master, depending upon their age, sex, and marital status. Yet, he didn't mind, because Crooms would always tell me that the number one rule in being a good doorman was to know everybody's business, but the number two rule was to always publicly 'mind your own', and when he'd say these rules he'd shoot me this real serious look, like they were some CIA codes, or something. I mean, here was a man of age and dignity, yet he had to be treated like he was a subservient child, and pretend to be ok with it, just like a genuine nobody. I guess that's why he took such a shining to being called a Mayor. Anyway, that sort of indignity never made

him less of a nobody, but it didn't make him more of one, either.

Anyway, that was all years ago. The real reason I wanted to tell you all about the Mayor was because of something that I found out about him, just yesterday, and it happened only a few days ago, on Christmas Eve. Now, let me just say that I don't know whether this is all true or not, and I'm not the sort of person that approves of gossip, but when I first heard it I believed it, because it just seemed like a very Croomsian thing to do, you know? Ok, so, it's about a day before Christmas- that's when it all started, and that kid you heard about in all the papers, what got run over and killed on the BQE, near New Calvary Cemetery- or maybe the old one?, he's still alive- Lester Grinspoon, I think it was, and he's playing with his pals, a bunch of pre-teen nobodies, and they're daring him, the way people fated to be nobodies are wont, to you know, run out into and back on the highway. I mean, kids do that, especially when they're young and bored and stupid, and the first real hint that they will do nothing with their lives enters their brains. It's almost as if there is a self-destruct mechanism that says, end it now, before the bleakness rends you bit by bit into nobodiness. *Better to burn out than to fade away*, as Neil Young says. Especially if you're doomed to a life as a nobody.

Lemme give you another example- like when I was a kid, me and my pals would go skitching off of cars on a fresh snowfall. Yeah, yeah, you know- you crouch down between some parked cars and when a car comes by, real slow on freshly fallen snow, you jump out, grab on to its back bumper, crouch down, and get pulled along like you're skiing, or something. It's a real city type thing to do, but, anyway....I mean, it's certainly dangerous, and who knew when some asshole would slam on the breaks, or you'd hit a pothole or manhole cover? Randy Twist, my pal when I was a kid, and a nobody so nobody that nobody knows what happened to him, totally shattered both his ankles while skitching back in, oh, I think it was '68, during that big storm- or maybe '69? Well, anyway, this Lester kid's only ten or so, and not too bright, and a few of his friends are running back and forth across the westbound BQE and a couple of times they get real close to being clipped by cars, and the cars almost crash into each other to avoid hitting them, or when slamming on the brakes. I mean, this is really stupid shit these kids are doing. So, anyway, Old Crooms is walking through the cemetery 'cause he likes to collect the old wreaths and sometimes try to salvage living plants, to replant them or something. It's a strange habit, but I heard that lots of old folks, especially nobodies, do this- walk through cemeteries. I think

it's maybe like with homing pigeons, you know? I mean, the closer you get to death the more you start caring where you're gonna be spending eternity. That said, I think Old Crooms just liked the flowers that were still alive. So, anyways, he sees little Les, whose the only one of the kids he knows personally. This is because one of the Mayor's favorite places to hang out is outside of *Lanza's Barber Shop*, up on Maurice and 55<sup>th</sup>. And that's where they got one of the last old fashioned shoeshine stands in the borough, and where he first met Les, who worked as a shoeshine boy the previous summer. The two talked, because shoe shining is the type of business conducive to conversationalism, and the young nobody was somehow fascinated by the darker, older nobody, and all his tales of bullshit about this and that from time gone by. But, there was this one incident, one day, when this nasty German guy, who worked somewhere on one of them construction sites near the creek, sits down. The Mayor, of course, was sitting down, reading a paper, and talking to old Fogarty, who ran the shoeshine stand, and also the flower concession cart right next to it, because many guys, after a haircut and shave, are ready to go out on a date with a young lady, you see? So, anyway, Les knows this guy, his name's Swilling, but he's a real asshole, and starts complaining about the job Les is doing, and starts calling him all sorts of names, until the Mayor steps in and they have words- him and Swilling. Apparently, Swilling lets forth a few epithets, struts around, and thinks that's that. He's a nobody, and knows it, but when he sees the Mayor getting angry there's something inside of Swilling, as a white nobody, that crumples, even though Crooms is an old man, as if he knew he had a lifetime of beatings coming due to him from nobodies who weren't white. This small act of standing up to Swilling, firmly but with just a look that scared Swilling off, made Les like the Mayor, and feel a twinge of guilt over the lie he was gonna tell to him in a few minutes.

But, back to the real story- Crooms is now telling Les how foolish it is to be running in and out of traffic, especially on a busy highway like the BQE. But, this kid is in front of a band of future nobodies, who don't share the same level of respect for Crooms as Les does, and if there's one thing nobodies of all ages detest it's being made to feel like a lesser nobody in front of other nobodies- especially if those other nobodies are friends of theirs. Now, Les gets defiant, and won't listen, until Crooms threatens to tell his parents of his foolishness. That's when the kid finally promises not to run out into traffic. He says, 'Ok, Mayor, I guess you're right. I won't do it anymore. It's real

stupid. I promise.’ But the other little nobodies start whispering the sorts of things that nobodies surely were meant to do, in their eternal quest to belittle other nobodies into feeling they were even less of a person than they felt they were. So, Crooms wisely doubts him until the boy swears again that he’s telling the truth, and tells Crooms to bend over, and so he does, and Les whispers something into his ear. I don’t know what exactly it was, for Crooms would not tell me what it was, except that he didn’t understand it all, but he sensed it was something important and something that made him trust the boy’s words, despite the situation, his nobody status, and Crooms knowing full well that if he was a little nobody, again, like Les, and in that same sort of peer pressured situation Les was in, he’d surely tell some old nobody like himself, who was pestering him, something, anything to get the old fool off his back. But, on the other hand, Les had never lied to Crooms, and the way he emphasized their secret, and shot Crooms that look, it was as if Les and his very existence were riding on it, the secret between them, or at least his eternal existence after this existence. This sort of ominosity, or ominousness, or whatever the correct term is, was not sitting well with the Mayor. Young boys should not be ominous. Cantakerous, ridiculous....yes. But never ominous. Yet, Crooms was moved by the boy’s words and secret entreaty, although he still thought he was being BS’d, and was pretty good at sniffing out such, but Les swore again, in front of his pals, in a grandiose manner, that he and his pals would plot no more foolishness, and would go their separate ways, as it was near supertime, anyway. And that’s what they did, or seemed to do, in an attempt to shine on the old nobody. Of course, when he left their view they all doubled around, and gathered back at the edge of the highway, a few minutes later, and they all had a good chuckle over how gullible the old Mayor was. Of course, their whole act was all just to fool the old man, and Crooms had suspected it, and maybe ‘cause they all knew the old man would try to tell Les’s folks anyway, which is just what Crooms aimed to do, they were not so careful about it- their plan. It would be a *fait accompli* long before anything could come of it.

Now, the Grinspoons live over on 47<sup>th</sup> Street, off of Roosevelt Avenue, not far from Old Crooms’s place, and he knows this, and so he goes right over there, straight from the cemetery, to ring their bell, to warn them of their son’s foolishness, and hopefully have one of the boy’s parents rush down and save the boy before something bad happens. I mean, it’s early evening, after a hard day’s work, and the parents are watching the evening news, or *Jeopardy*,

or something, with no great concern about where their son is, for he's a boy, and that random fact of a chromosomal change to Y, or his phallic accoutrement, is enough to keep both Mr. and Mrs. Grinspoon from worrying over his every move. Were Lester Lesley he, or she, would never have even been allowed out of the house without worry hovering in their minds. The old 'expendable male' theory, I guess. But, Les is Lester, and for countless nights the Grinspoons' predictable evenings have gone by in peace, serenity, and dullness, just as this one is going. Save for a two foot tall aluminum Christmas tree, and *The Yule Log* on Channel 11, you'd never guess it was Christmas Eve. Mr. Grinspoon is reading the Daily News, and trying to avoid his wife's attempts at sharing her 'deepest emotions'. He knows that the rest of their relations will be gathering somewhere out on the Island, tonight, but he's content to spend a Queens Christmas Eve in relative silence. Mrs. Grinspoon, however, is looking forward to tomorrow, when she will be able to force her husband and son to spend time with her relatives. So, in to disturb this connubial bliss is the Mayor, who rings the bell to their apartment. Now, as I went to school with both of the Grinspoons, I know the way this nobody couple is, and you just knew the Mrs. was gonna be all haughty that her holiday festivities were thrown for a loop.

Crooms hears the speaker come on, in the white tiled vestibule of the building, and it's Mrs. Grinspoon, of course, who answers, so Crooms announces who he is, and says that he has something very urgent to tell her that's very important, because he's no dummy, despite what she and the other white folk on the block think, due to his race and all, and he knows that she would want to hear what he's gotta say, since it concerns her son, her only child, her baby, and he knows how much she loves him, and he just feels it's his duty as an adult, and the Mayor of Maspeth, to watch out for those folks what's too young or stupid or ill to watch out for themselves, see? So he starts to tell her that Les is gonna keep doing the traffic dashing, and he has a bad feeling over it, like he did when his pet frog died, when he was a boy, that summer in Tennessee, when Coolidge was elected President, or was it Hoover?- it was some Republican before FDR, that great Democrat his daddy loved- that's all he's sure of, but he knows to trust this feeling because the phlebitis in his left leg is acting up and that's never been wrong as an omen before. When he last had an attack like this, real bad, was back a few years ago when that hurricane, David or Daniel?, hit Maspeth really hard, and fucked things up really bad. And that was- But, when Mrs. Grinspoon

heard Crooms's black accent, she turned off immediately, even before his discombobulated ramblings, as all she knows, and figures she needs to know, it can only be that old black bum, as she calls him in private, and that he's probably drunk again, and so she says, really dismissively, 'I'm real busy now, Mayor, I haven't got time for you, and your stories. Please go sleep it off, and don't be bothering hard working folks. It's just not neighborly. Good night.' Of course, the truth of the situation is she is no less a genuine nobody than the Mayor is, but just has a bigger swelled head, perhaps due to her job as a beautician, and working with hair conditioners, or something. Then Crooms doesn't hear anymore from the speaker in the vestibule of the Grinspoon's building. She has cut him off. So he rings the bell again, several times, and when he hears the other end, again, he's ready to try and speak even faster this time, because he thinks it just must have been a malfunction, as surely Mrs. Grinspoon would want to know about her son's folly? But Mrs. Grinspoon cuts him off before he can get two words out of his mouth. It's not even two syllables, to be honest. He cannot understand why even ten seconds to warn them of their son's danger is too much to ask of them. They don't have to like him. They don't have to like his skin color. They don't have to be jealous of his Mayoralty. They just have to listen. It's important, and Les's life could depend on it. So, he rings the bell a third time, and now Mrs. Grinspoon won't even reply, nor get up from the kitchen chair and answer it. She bitches loudly as the Mayor keeps ringing the bell, until she sends her reluctant, and dough-faced husband, who's a man with a large beer belly, and perpetual five o'clock shadow- a real wife beater-wearing sort of soul, down the three long flights of stairs to escort 'that smelly old coon', as she is now calling the Mayor, in her anger, out of the building.

When Crooms sees Mr. Grinspoon coming down the stairs, and opening the door, he is momentarily relieved, as he believes he is finally being accorded the seriousness he deserves, and he tries to speak, still quickly, but loses his breath in the surprise of being forcefully- but somehow gingerly- grabbed, and taken by his arm, down the stone stairs of the building's stoop, and led away from the building and out into the empty Decembral street. He is surprised by the treatment, as he is only trying to do good, especially considering the season of the year, as well as how powerless he is in the larger man's grip- despite being in pretty good shape for a man of his years. He almost stumbled down the stoop, but still accepts this as typical treatment for a nobody from another, less secure, nobody. Yet, he is still determined to

do what he must, spurred on by all the Christmas lights that are blinking on and off in the dozens of windows all up and down the block.

‘You are Mr. Grinspoon, right? Aren’t you sir?’ says Crooms, with his anxiety rising.

‘That’s right, Mayor. You know that. You see me every Sunday, down at *Billy’s Candy Store*, getting the lottery. Look, I didn’t mean to rough you up, but the old lady got me by the balls, ok? Still, it’s not right to go around ringing white folks’ bells like this- especially given the joyous time of the year, and all. *Ok?* You could get hurt, you know what I mean? I mean, alot of folks around here ain’t as open-minded as what we are, especially the guineas. They don’t like your kind around here, ok? So do us all a favor and go home, and get a good night’s sleep- hey, here, take this dollar bill and go get yourself a soda, ok? Or some candy? No booze, though!’

‘But, Mr. Grinspoon, I ain’t lookin’ to get no candy, or no booze, or nothin’, I swear’ says Crooms, ‘it’s about your son, he’s-     ’

‘I know, I know, he’s told me all about how you and him are pals and how you taught him all them card tricks. You certainly got talent- you should move down to Atlantic City and hustle. You taught the whole damn nabe, Mayor. I swear, we could start a casino here, if they’d just legalize gambling like they did the lottery.’

‘But, but, it’s about-     ’ says Crooms.

‘Goodnight, Mayor, and Merry Christmas....*and to all a good night.*’ his voice trailed off, as a light snow suddenly flickered downward- a single snowflake cooling Crooms’s left eye, open too wide with fear.

You see, Mr. Grinspoon is too full on himself, like his wife, although in a nicer way, and his nobodied hubris of superiority, and cannot believe that the old man is trying to actually warn him that his son is in danger. Of course, he worries more when his son is with the Mayor than when he’s with his friends. Not like the Mayor’s some pedophile, but due to that old ‘*Don’t Trust The Darkies*’ sort of mentality that inhabits to many white folks, especially the true nobodies, and gets passed on from generation to generation like some shit that makes a dwarf a dwarf- you know, it can skip a generation here or there, but then it only comes back worse in the next generation after the one it’s skipped. And, of course, aside from that there’s just the plain old typical nobody denial of a problem- for surely the Grinspoons must have known their son was a foolish risk-taker sort of kid. But I digress, and don’t want to sound too preachy. I’m not much better than any of the poor nobodies I am



speaking of. Then, before Mr. Grinspoon got back inside his front door, they heard some carolers in the distance, singing *We Three Kings*, and Mr. Grinspoon tells Crooms that if he follows them they may lead him back to the *Salvation Army* shelter, a few blocks away- maybe he can enjoy a concert, or sing with them- ‘You got a good singing voice, eh, Mayor?, Mr. Grinspoon says, not because he knows but because he thinks all black folk can sing well, like gospelteers. The fact is that Crooms did have a good tenor voice, and was a choirboy in his church, as a youth, but he frowns, knowing that Mr. Grinspoon cannot possibly know this, and is just assuming his good baritone due to his blackness. Mr. Grinspoon then punctuates his backhanded insult with a final charge that maybe the Mayor can ‘sleep it off’. Crooms shouts that that *Salvation Army* shelter closed two years ago, and he knows this because he used to volunteer there, mainly around Christmas, and as a Santa, not because he lived there, and that the nearest open one is down on Wyckoff Avenue, a few miles away, in Ridgewood, but that he doesn’t need a shelter anyway, because....But, Mr. Grinspoon, the fool that he is, didn’t even realize that the Mayor was a resident, as in *having a residence*, of the nabe. He just has always assumed he was homeless, like the other bums, but only because he’s a black nobody, not because he’s just a regular nobody like himself, which is a fact that Mr. Grinspoon hates about himself, after so many years of being a low paid wage slave, yet having not the ambition nor vision to do a damned thing about it, much as he would have left his wife years ago had he not been ashamed of his weight problem and doubted his ability to find another woman to sleep with. None of this is relevant to the Mayor, now, as Old Crooms has been stifled, and left out in the street. Should he go back to the highway and try to physically grab Les? No, no. Never should a black person ever grab a white person, even if they’re gonna get run over. His daddy told Crooms that when he was four, long before he even went to school, and got out in the world. Or does he just mind his own business? No one can say he didn’t *try* to do what was right, as he did, by trying to warn the Grinspoons. Was it his fault that they were stuck-up fools? Maybe losing their boy would help them set themselves right? No, he couldn’t think so cruelly, like that. Fate would play out, he knew, but how he wanted to see an arrogant and deceitful little Lester Grinspoon coming up the block, and telling him he shouldn’t have worried, then bargain with the old Mayor about not breathing a word of his folly to his parents. Crooms said, to himself, ‘Well, I’ll only do that if you promise never to act foolish again.’

And the boy would accept, because boys need not repeat a past folly as long as newer follies come along to cast their siren call. Damn, he thought, where is Lester? Come on home, boy. Crooms decided to keep a watch on the Grinspoons' building because he knew he would not sleep that night. It was what Jesus would do, he implored himself. But, the truth was that he simply didn't know what to do, other than wait, as the caroling was getting louder, although he could not see the carolers, nor where they were coming from, and as the words of the song filled the air, and his soul-

*O star of wonder, star of night,  
Star with royal beauty bright.  
Westward leading, still proceeding,  
Guide us to thy perfect light.*

-another sound, that of a car slamming on its brakes, in a panic, on the BQE, and getting rear-ended by another car, and another, is drowned out by the distance and the joyous season. Crooms tries futilely shouting up to the Grinspoons' window, for can see some activity inside, as the parents must be getting worried. The boy is definitely late for supper, or whatever, and it's been over an hour since Mr. Grinspoon gave him the buck. Finally, they might be thinking they shouldn't have blown off the old Mayor, yet he won't ring their bell again, as he was turned off by their hostility. And shouting does no good, as the windows are locked, on this chill December evening, and although they heard him, the last hour, they ignored him, even as they now take note of the outside world, and where their son may be in it. Mrs. Grinspoon hears-

*Deck the halls with boughs of holly  
Fa-la-la-la-la, la-la-la-la  
'Tis the season to be jolly  
Fa-la-la-la-la, la-la-la-la  
Don we now our gay apparel  
Fa-la-la, la-la-la, la-la-la.  
Troll the ancient Yule-tide carol  
Fa-la-la-la-la, la-la-la-la.*

-and asks her husband what the name of that carol is. She is nervous, and then asks if maybe he should take a walk around the nabe, and look for their son. He says *Deck The Halls*, and feels even more superior now, over his nobody of a wife, than he did the old Mayor, but realizes he has no time to gloat, grabs a jacket and some gloves, and tells his wife not to worry. He'll

find Les, and feels like he's finally earning his testicles. Men always feel a need to squeeze their balls, literally or figuratively, in times of crisis, as if panicked they will undescend and leave the man singing falsetto. This mild macho feeling fills him up well, and makes him feel momentarily superior to the rest of the world, until, about an hour later, after returning after a fruitless search, since he ignored the Mayor, who tried catching up to Mr. Grinspoon, but failed, due to the slippery light snow that had fallen, he returns home, without his son, while the Mayor has dozed off next to some garbage cans across the street from the Grinspoons' building, still hoping to tell them the news he hopes is wrong. That's when he sees that there are a couple of police cars, from the 104<sup>th</sup> Precinct, parked in front of their apartment building, and rushes up to his apartment, where he learns that Lester was hit and killed by a car on the BQE, fooling around with some of his friends, who gave an account of their boy's final moments. The large Hispanic police detective is not surprised that the Grinspoons are not comforted in the least by the fact that they determined that Les was killed instantly, upon impact, and did not suffer a long, lingering death.

The detective's words are well without of earshot for the slowly reawakening Crooms to hear, but he knows too well what has been said. He just *knows it*- what happened to Les, what his parents heard, and he starts weeping like a man who's never wept before. He has failed. He's a nobody. That's what they do. He should have burst into the apartment building like a wild man. So what if he ruined his reputation as the genial old coon with delusions of grandeur- the so-called Mayor Of Maspeth? Now, it's too late, and on Christmas Eve, of all days. But, he knows that he tried. But, that's no solace in the face of the senseless death of a boy. He wants to rush up and tell the cops and the Grinspoons that he tried to warn them, not to be superior, but just to let it be known that there was another person in this world that cared for, even loved, a boy who is no longer. But, a crowd of neighbors has gathered outside, on the stoop. Cop cars gather vultures without wings, and the rumors are flying that Les was a druggie and OD'd, or that he fell victim to some killer name of Fitz-something or other, who everyone in the nabe heard of but knew nothing about. The Mayor hears this and starts upbraiding the gossipers, telling them that the boy was hit by a car, and that it was an avoidable tragedy- emphasis on *tragedy*. The other nobodies, all white, laugh at his claims. Laughter, at a time like this?, he thought. 'You all should be ashamed of yourself, running down a poor boy like- ' But he couldn't

complete his thought, as the Grinspoons were coming out, surrounded by five or six cops, breaking through the crowd like ships up near Greenland do. They are in shock and in convulsions, especially Mrs. Grinspoon, who is crying and screaming, and whom he now forgives for her insolent rudeness, and feels nothing but all the pity in the world for. They are taken down to street level, and into the car to go view the body at the morgue for identification. As the Mayor still feels he didn't do enough to warn them, and possibly prevent the tragedy, and is wracked with his own guilt, he tries to approach the Grinspoons, to tell them that this was why he was trying to talk to them- to save Les, not harass them, but Mrs. Grinspoon lashes out, like a cat with claws extended, to scratch him, but he pulls back too quickly to be hurt, having learned his lesson from her husband's manhandling of him earlier in the evening, as she is thinking the old man is just like the other bastards, and, in her convulsive impotence, settles for calling the Mayor all the dirtiest racial slurs she can think of, still unaware that had she listened to him an hour or so earlier she may have been able to do something, and her baby might still be alive. She has long hated the nabe, and every miserable soul in it, especially those who most remind her of herself. She turns from her failure to hurt Crooms when she sees Betty Magliore- whose hatred for she feels with an intensity far more personally and deeply than some old jig bum, who is smoking a cigaret, with a look on her face that Mrs. Grinspoon just knows is a satisfied smugness- the 'I told you your son was nothing but trouble' look. A female cop, however, is reading Betty's base and obvious mind, too, as she is used to these sorts of situations, and eases Mrs. Grinspoon into the squad car, before trouble ensues, and tells Betty Magliore to shut the fuck up, even though she has not said a word of what she wanted to. She realizes she'll have her opportunities, though, later, after the holidays, when there are no cops around, and heads back to her apartment, knocking Crooms out of the way as she goes, and, when no one is able to see her, she smiles, because she knows that Les was always smarter than her boy- but knows that fact doesn't mean a damned thing now.

And so it goes. Over the next few hours Crooms tries to speak to the neighbors, to set the story straight, so that this libel and slander about the boy does not take root, like so many lies do. He was a boy who acted foolishly, but that didn't make him a fool. And he certainly wasn't any junky, or any of the other nasty innuendoes that were floating around. But, they all rejected the truth only the Mayor knew. Their *faux* 'respect' for him dissipated as

easily as their consciences. Crowds of threes and fours lasted a good two or so hours into the night, after the Grinspoons were taken away. The Mayor still was determined to do his best to bounce between them like a pinball, and set records straight. After all, he was the Mayor, and *the hub of all hubbub*, as someone once called him. But, now, there wasn't even a care. The conversations were about what was wrong with the Giants, or when would the Rangers finally get a Stanley Cup for all their efforts. Lester Grinspoon was not even dead three hours, and his death was not even as important to the nabe as some lousy sports gossip was.

As the streets cleared, waves of carolers would occasionally filter back and forth across the streets, their songs echoing through the concrete canyons like Injun calls must have done out west, a century ago, or more:

*City sidewalk, busy sidewalks  
dressed in holiday style.  
In the air there's  
a feeling of Christmas.*

*Children laughing, people passing,  
meeting smile after smile,  
And on every street corner you'll hear:*

*Silver bells, silver bells,  
It's Christmas time in the city.  
Ring-a-ling, hear them ring,  
soon it will be Christmas day.*

-At that last line Crooms started to weep again. He wept for quite a while, all alone, and even the songs were no comfort after a while. Yet, Crooms did not leave. He sat on the Grinspoons front stoop fully expecting that relatives of the Grinspoons would soon be gathering, and he wanted to tell them what really happened, even though the cops didn't want to hear from him. But, none came. Were the Grinspoons even aloner than he was? It couldn't be. Then, a red-haired teenager came up the steps, and asked what the fuck he wanted, and Crooms told him he was waiting for the Grinspoon relations to- But the kid, who turned out to be Les's older cousin, threatens to 'break a bat over your head, old nigger. See?', and orders Crooms to get his 'old, black ass' off their stoop, so he left. But, he watched from around the corner, and after a few rings of their bell, and a few shouts up to the darkened Grinspoon windows, the foul-mouthed cousin sees the Grinspoons car still

parked on the street, and figures they must still be at the 104<sup>th</sup>, and so he leaves.

A few minutes later, Crooms is just about to doze off when he sees a cop car pull up in front of the Grinspoons' building, and that same lady cop from earlier talking to the bereaved couple, and them heading up the stoop. The Mayor dashes over as quickly as he could, yelling he needs to speak to them, and the Grinspoons see him, and just shake their heads, and head inside, as the female cop, abetted by her male partner, who jumps out with his pistol drawn, because all he knows is that a wild black man is headed his partner's way, tells him to stop, and to not annoy the family at a time like this. But, Crooms can see that she's not like most cops, and catches his breath, and asks if he can just tell her what he knows. The lady cop decides to humor him, and then, after hearing him out, tells him that what he knows will be helpful in the investigation, but that the family can hear about it later. She asks Crooms to come down to the station with her, and he does- although he's wary, because the 104<sup>th</sup> has a reputation as being not too hospitable a place for anyone, especially those with darker skin. But, it is like a morgue, on this holiday night, and she takes his statement, and even brings him a bowl of hot chicken soup, which she microwaves.

They talk a bit, after the statement, and Crooms tells him he felt it was his duty, as the Mayor of Maspeth, to set the record straight. She thanks him, and then drives him home- to his place, not far from the Grinspoons. She thanks him again, and says that she will call him, as she has his telephone number, if she needs anything else from him, then wishes him a Merry Christmas, and drives off. Crooms is tired, and wants to go to bed, but the snow that is on the ground is so lovely and bright and blinkering under the streetlights, and something about it compels him to go back to the Grinspoons' place, so he does. Yet, he cannot bring himself to intrude- it would be too 'I told you so.' Instead, he falls asleep next to the dumpster in their building's alleyway, all the while looking up toward the Grinspoons' apartment's window. It is a little past two a.m. when he awakens, almost in unison with the lights going on in the Grinspoons' apartment. They are up. He knew it. But, it would be unseemly to ring the bell, and dangerous to shout up, at this hour. But, he knows, he just knows what will happen, just as he knew that poor Les was going to lie to him, and risk death.

A few minutes pass, and there is the sound of crunching snow, and he sees Mr. Grinspoon, in his coat and boots hauling two big plastic bags to the

dumpster. He sees Crooms, and says, 'Well, well. Somehow, I just knew I'd find you here, Mayor.'

'You did?' Crooms says.

'Sure, you just *had* to tell me something, didn't you?'

'Well, that's right. Can I take it those were Les's presents?'

'Bingo- give the man a bowling ball.'

Crooms said, 'Why not just give them to the *Salvation Army*?'

'Because they were for Les. I can't do it. I have to chuck them. Just have to. But the law says garbage is community property, so once they're in the dumpster you can take'em and sell'em. I'll even give you the receipts, if you want the money for returning them.'

'No, no,' said Crooms. 'I want no money from you, especially no blood money. I just wanted to tell you about what I saw today. I told this to the police, just before, and think you deserve to know. I saw Les, and his friends. They was on the BQE, or right by it....'

And, so Mr. Grinspoon, needing to get told things about his son, even as he ridded himself of other, more material, things, leaned against the dumpster, and started smoking a cigaret, and offered one to Crooms, who obliged the kindness, and they smiled at each other as Mr. Grinspoon's lighter's light danced among the pure snow of this newest day. The windows to the two buildings that made the alley were dark, but there was a feeling that things small and beautiful were watching the two men. There weren't, really, but the feeling was powerful, all the same. They talked for ten or twenty minutes, but not only about Les, and were only interrupted by the faint noise of carolers, whose persistence this deep into the night surprised Mr. Grinspoon.

Crooms said, 'Oh, hell, when I was a boy they'd go all night. It's kind of a good thing, I think. For one night there should be praise and joy to the Lord, don't you think?'

Mr. Grinspoon mumbled, and the Mayor realized that the Lord wasn't one of his comrade's favorite folks at a time like this. But, Mr. Grinspoon liked the things Crooms had said, and the way his voice sounded, and the night was not so cold as one might expect, as the collective heat from the cigarets and their bodies bounced back to them from the bricks. They laughed and told jokes and it all seemed like some warm fuzzy moment from an old tv show like *The Waltons*, until she stepped in front of the source of light that came from without the alley. It was Mrs. Grinspoon, of course, worried that her husband had fallen prey to the city, as well, and was none too pleased to see

him spending the night and first morning of their son's death, Christmas morning, bullshitting with a senile and crazy and drunk old man like the Mayor.

'It's you,' said Mr. Grinspoon.

She said, 'Of course it's me. Les's mother- *our* son. The *dead* one!'

'What do you want, dear?' he said nonchalantly as could be.

'Well, my husband, for one, upstairs and comforting me in my hour of need would be nice. That would work, for starters.'

'I just needed to get out, and, taking out the garbage, I ran into the Mayor. We had a nice chat about life and things.'

'Is that all you can do? Chat with an old fool, while your wife, mother of your child, sits alone and worried, over the fact that you can't even get rid of some toys without....' and she sniffled, 'And I wasn't the one who wanted to get rid of those damn things, Mister!'

Crooms said nothing, as silence reigned, and light snow fell again. Then he said, 'Well, now that you're both here, may I tell you, Mrs. Grinspoon, what I just told your husband, about Les, one of the things what I wanted to tell you about earlier?'

She stood there, her tears cutting into her face like water into a dried riverbed, and said, 'I really don't....oh, oh....ok, what the hell?' and giggled, as he husband now held her firmly in the largeness of his warmth.

Crooms then repeated what he had told to Mr. Grinspoon, and went on and on about Les, and things they knew little of, starting from when he and Les had first met at the shoe shine stand, and each word seemed to help a bit, in their understanding of what they had lost. At first this saddened them more, but then it made them happier. And Crooms talked till maybe three a.m., when Mrs. Grinspoon finally, without warning, apologized for what she had said, and what she had done, earlier, to him.

'I'm ashamed of it. I wasn't raised that way, I swear!' she pleaded.

'I accept your apology,' said Crooms, 'and let me just reiterate how sorry I am, and what a fine boy Lester was. I'm just a man, too. We're all human, and prey to emotions. I mean, once I was a doorman, at a swanky apartment building, and now I'm just a Mayor- and we all know what that really means,' and he giggled. 'You see, I never had any children, and I guess I must seem presumptuous to think I can know what....I was never trying to hurt you. I just wanted to....'

And Mrs. Grinspoon touched the Mayor's hand, and felt that his brownness



wouldn't come off, like she was always told. How silly a thought that was. *How stupid!* She thought how stupid and selfish a woman she was, and how angry she had been when she first saw her husband with Crooms, but, now she understood, and didn't want to leave the alley, even though a part of her was cold, and another part hot as hell, and another part wanted to invite Crooms up for Christmas breakfast, despite what the neighbors might think, because this alley was now special, and so warm that she felt a need to take off and hand her coat, laden with angry sweat, to her husband. She asked about Crooms's life and he told them of all the great adventures he had as a doorman in Manhattan, and all the celebrities and rich, and many others. Dawn was still a few hours off, but all three of them talked and talked, but more importantly, they listened to each other, and the Grinspoons began to understand and empathize with people like Crooms, who told them of his loneliness and of not really being seen, even when he was, and he began to like them, and understood how they had come to where they were, and how they finally saw a way out, even in Les's death's aftermath, and husband and wife felt better about things and life than they had in a long time, and they enjoyed just holding their hands in the alleyway, knowing that they had things, even if briefly, that many others only wished for.

The Mayor was feeling good about himself, and his position in the nabe- for helping people was a gift, and without intending it, he had done so far better than he had when he actively tried to help them. Things are funny that way. Then, he remembered what was the very reason for why he had wanted to talk to the Grinspoons in the first place, but had forgotten in his concerted effort to not blurt it out when he was down at the police house, and told them both what Les had whispered into his ear, the last moments that anyone in the alley had seen the boy alive. What Les told Crooms, Crooms said, was not a lie, not really, when you thought about it. Of course, he admitted, since it meant little to him, he was just guessing on that point, due to his respect for their son's sterling character. Its meaning was of no real consequence to him, but its import he sensed right away. After all, much of life is filled with things we don't rationally understand, but accept, and pass on, for others will be moved in some way by them. *How does a plane fly?* I don't know. Neither did Crooms nor the Grinspoons. It just does, and it gets people where they want to go. And that's the important thing.

Upon hearing her son's final words Mrs. Grinspoon wept without surcease, for a good three or four minutes, and the force of her lungs echoed about the

alley until she cried herself out, and that's when they all heard a Christmas carol coming near, out of the seemingly endless morning. It was *The Little Drummer Boy*. It was Les's favorite, said Mrs. Grinspoon, and he was her little drummer boy, always, and tears welled in her eyes as they listened to the first verse:

*Come they told me  
pa rum pum pum pum  
A new born King to see,  
pa rum pum pum pum  
Our finest gifts we bring  
pa rum pum pum pum  
To lay before the King  
pa rum pum pum pum  
rum pum pum pum  
rum pum pum pum  
So to honor Him  
pa rum pum pum pum,  
when we come.*

By the end of it all three of them were slowly and softly mouthing the words, as well:

*Little Baby  
pa rum pum pum pum  
I am a poor boy too,  
pa rum pum pum pum  
I have no gift to bring  
pa rum pum pum pum  
That's fit to give our King  
pa rum pum pum pum  
rum pum pum pum  
rum pum pum pum  
Shall I play for you  
pa rum pum pum  
on my drum.*

At that, Mrs. Grinspoon wept again, openly, furiously, and angrily, as her husband held her, which was all he could do, and as the carolers went off into the distance, too far away, only Crooms' voice, a rich, fluid tenor, remained:

*Mary nodded*

*pa rum pum pum pum*  
*The ox and lamb kept time*  
*pa rum pum pum pum*  
*I played my drum for Him*  
*pa rum pum pum*  
*I played my best for Him*  
*pa rum pum pum pum*  
*rum pum pum pum*  
*rum pum pum pum*  
*Then He smiled at me*  
*pa rum pum pum pum*  
*me and my drum.*

The Grinspoons listened, and smiled through the chill and hurt. They took in all they could of what they could. It was a boon to them that was like all time and life rolled into a ball, that the Star Of Bethlehem alone shone upon- at least, that's what Mrs. Grinspoon said. And in the high morning light off the broken, dusty windows at the top of the alleyway, she missed many things that light could not touch- her son, her past, but most of all Crooms' voice, which was suddenly done.

So, like them, I asked him to continue, and he said, 'Well, Aaron, I had paused, momentarily, even knowing the dilemma my silence was inflicting upon her, for it had been a few years since my last cigaret, you see. So I coughed, cleared my throat, and knowing full well I had the greatest audience I would ever have, that they were utterly rapt by everything I did, instinct told me to begin to sing the first verse of the song again. So, I did. *Why?* Because. Just because, damn it.'

# In The Genes

What exactly is it that impels human beings to invest such a sizable portion of their beings in animals? Pets, to be sure, but even in other wilder beasts? I mean, I'm a city man, for sure, but when I see an animal- be it one of those pampered and coiffed toy poodles from the Upper West Side, or a mangy mutt in a lot, or a parakeet in a bird shop, or a stray cat, or even a lobster in a tank at the supermarket, well, I don't know. I just don't know what comes over me and destroys my otherwise good sense. I start babbling like some new father to his baby, and invest all sorts of ideas and feelings into the animals that they certainly cannot have without my investment.

And that investment can take a toll, especially for those prone to the fierce, raging loyalty that we demand of pets. The pet owner is just as fierce in return, and often fiercer, especially in the case of so many devil-may-care cats. There is no moderation for someone swept up by the tongue of a love-giving puppy, or the warmth of a kitten. Yet, while these emotions are familiar, and we use human terms to define them, the truth is that there is also something aside from emotions we normally feel for those of our own kind. I do not know how to properly phrase it, but I felt it for a dog my brother had, when we were young. Both are dead now- my brother and his dog. Pardon me if I don't go any more deeply into description, for I am too emotional about both of them, still. Even their names, although unspoken aloud, conjure up things within me that are not suitable to share, not even with my wife, and for this reason I feel a certain guilt over that fact.

Think about it- what primacy of emotion can affect that way? Really, I mean, just ponder it. There are things that are so deep and so primal that I feel embarrassed to tell my wife of. I mean, I've told her of all my beliefs, values, sexual experiences, and even the few petty 'white collar crimes' that I've been forced to commit over the years. But, there is still a barrier whereas it concerns my brother and his dog. Perhaps this all started, or came to ahead, a few minutes ago. It must have been our seeing that small pooch limping across the deserted Manhattan streets on a Saturday evening. My wife is one of those bleeding heart liberals from Manhattan that are so well represented in Woody Allen films, although she's a Roman Catholic Italian. Or perhaps it was something deeper, far beyond a small dog whose life I'll never encounter again, and whose memory will likely fade with tomorrow's first sun. My wife

Amy commented to me, as she is wont, as we headed into the subway. ‘Oh, Gene, shouldn’t we call the ASPCA or something?’

I told her that it looked like an old limp, a natural one, and that he seemed healed, and able to maneuver on his own. The dog was obviously a stray, and had probably been so since it was a puppy, through whatever travails such lives entail. I told her if the ASPCA got it they would just end up putting it to sleep in a day or two. They were like a pet Gestapo. She worried that it would be hit by a car, though, and I had nothing of any real value to say in response. I limply told her that if it had learned to survive and dodge cars this long it would probably keep right on doing so, and not to worry.

But, my wife is one of those persistent types- justice or death, and all that, and my prediction did not satisfy her. She’s gotten that way, more and more, the longer we’ve been married. I mean, she really wanted to be a mom, for the longest time, but circumstances didn’t allow that. First loneliness, then her failed first marriage, then me, then a cyst on her ovaries, then menopause, and it was gone- the dream, if not the desire. But, what is desire without passion? And passion is built upon knowledge. But when the knowledge is insurmountable and/or irrefutable what is left? I wonder this drive to procreation, rather than creation. Granted, most can never really create and all but a few of us are capable of procreation. Still, I wonder. Amy’s smart, and I have to say I was relieved when, a few months back, she declared to me, ‘*I want to be the person my relatives proudly claim to be related to. I want to be the one all the sacrifices of my ancestors was for, not the one sacrificing.*’ She was on her way, I knew. Where to I wasn’t sure. I guess it’s a good thing, though, and just as she recovered from her disaster of a first marriage to a self-absorbed professor type named Talbot Greenblatt, she now seems determined to accomplish something. Yet, she’s also one of those types that is prone to homily. When we got on the train she asked me if I believed in fate. It was an odd question, and considering we’d been married almost four years, you’d think she’d have known the answer by now, and that would be *no*.

I said, ‘Sweetheart, like you have to ask? Oh boy, I know that tone of voice, there’s something going on in that gorgeous head that you don’t want to share. What’s really going on?’

She said, ‘No, I know you don’t believe in it. But there’s a difference between stating something and why you believe in that statement. I want to not just *hear* your answer, but the *why* behind it. That’s all.’

I shrugged my shoulders, and fumbled about a bit for words, then pointed out to her that this was the same subway line that we had first met on, and tried to change the conversation, but she'd have none of that.

'Come on, Gene,' she said, 'answer the damned question. I hate it when you avoid issues. Don't do it.'

'Ok, ok,' I said, 'lemme try to phrase it the best I can. Ok, let me see. Ok, you know that new fellow at work, who started just a few months ago? The fellow I told you who said he was in the World Trade Center when it was hit by the planes?'

'Oh, what'shisname? Um, Frank?'

'Yeah, that's right, Frank Glynn. He took over the assessment department, and he's getting along with the rest of the guys pretty well. Anyway, like I told you, he was in the North Tower, I think. Yeah- the one that was hit first, but crashed second, and made it all the way down ninety-something flights of stairs, and got out just a few minutes before it collapsed. Anyway, such an experience can make a man, y'know, philosophical, and so he is. I mean, there are some times when I see him looking out a window and I- I don't know. I've never seen that sort of intensity before. Like I said, such a thing changes a man. I've seen it before in Vietnam vets- guys my age. It's scary, though- like something has been snuffed out. So, a few months ago, we're all sitting around at lunch, eating and bullshitting, and Pepe starts bringing up predestination, saying that he believes in it, even though, from what I know, the Catholic Church doesn't preach it- not openly.'

'No', said Amy, 'believe me, Gene. It doesn't. That's up there with witches and things. All my years with the nuns....that's for sure.'

'So, anyway, Pepe is going on about all sorts of coincidences and things he read about. Things like little coincidences on the Titanic sinking, or when Allied soldiers found certain numerical patterns to the death camp victims who were spared. I mean, it's all bullshit, stuff that happens every day but is never thought about. But, he's making out like there's some great significance to it. So, anyway, he's going on and on, and me, Glynn, and O'Hara, are just sort of laying back, and letting Pepe hang himself with his superstitions. Johnson, though, he's sort of agreeing with Pepe, in a subtle way. So, this bullshit is apparently too much for old Glynn to take, and I can see that he's aiming to put Pepe and Johnson in their place, and he's like a wolf that's slavering over a dead moose, or something. And I can see Pepe getting all nervous, because, you know, he knows that Frank survived 9/11,

and that's a hell of a trump card to hold in that sort of instance. Plus, Glynn's a real smart bastard, much more so than Pepe is. So, Glynn shushes the both of them, and goes into explaining how fate is a silly thing. Basically, his argument boils down to the fact that, he says, fate is illogical because it would take on almost infinite complexity to try to plan out every possible interaction at every possible moment, calculated down from every possible action at every possible moment, whereas free will is astonishingly easier, for having individual agents controlling, even to a small degree, their own fates reduces the complexity from one force to almost infinite forces, meaning that instead of an infinite to one ratio you are left with an almost one to one ratio, which while still infinitely complex, is far more manageable for any one agent. Anyway, I liked his explanation- it made sense right away, and the more I thought about it the more I thought it was correct, and then he added off the topper that, if you believe in fate then you must logically believe that some greater being wanted all those people in 9/11 or any war or famine to die for a specific reason, and that therefore, the survivors must be better people, and 'chosen' for a reason. Imagine a god that wanted blacks to be massacred and enslaved, or the Holocaust to happen, or Mao Tse-Tung to murder millions. Fate, he said, needs reasons to support it, while free will can be aimless, as life truly is.'

I could see Amy was impressed with Glynn's explanation, as well as my ability to appreciate it, as well, and also to explicate it. As she smiled at me I wished that I had known her my whole life. I often wished that. I often wished for many things that were not, and could not be. If only there were a small degree of fate, then people could simply bypass all the wasted years and time with those who are of little or no consequence. Apparently, though, I was muttering these sentiments out loud, as is often my wont, for Amy picked right up on my train of thought.

She said, 'Yeah, but, I believe that your past helps to co-create you with whatever else there is in the universe. Had we met thirty years ago we would probably not have had the attraction we did for each other when we first met. It's not just about what or who you are, but when. Love is a multi-dimensional thing. Look at Rita and Howard.'

I said, 'Yeah, I suppose. But, on the other hand, look at what happened to my poor niece Dorothy. I mean, she's a sweet kid, a little on the tomboy side- well, she was years ago. My sister Doris was always worried that she would never get married, that she was, *you know*, was how she framed it. She never

said the word *lesbian*, of course, but we both knew what she meant. To her the very word was like a virus that would have caused her tongue to fall out. Of course, I had no idea of my niece's love life, one way or the other, but was happy when Doris finally called me to tell me that Dorothy had gotten engaged. It took me by surprise, if I'm being frank. Anyway, I remember the first time I was over at my sister's place, to meet her fiancé. I told you about Eugene, Eugene Carmellini. I think Doris was excited because he had the same first name as me, as if that was a good luck omen, or something-speaking of superstition and rot. We Monaghans are famous for our self-delusions, I tell you. She even said, 'He's a good man- like you. It's in the genes.' Punning and wordplay were never strong points in our family.'

'Well, my Falco clan is not much better- and don't even get me started on the McSweeneys!' Amy said.

'True, so true.' I said.

'Hey!' she pinched me and we chuckled.

I said, 'Well, no. Seriously. You know, I told you that Eugene and I used to take the same train to work a few years ago, before we met. I mean, I had nothing against the boy- or man, per se. He was a short, dumpy type, with his glasses. I mean, he wasn't even thirty and his hairline was almost as receded as mine. In short, no one would ever have mistaken him for Tom Cruise, and-speaking of which, wasn't it funny when that guy squirted water into his face from a fake microphone? Haha. Anyway, in truth, he was- in my opinion-lucky as hell to get a girl as pretty as Dorothy, even though she was a little butch, and I always suspected that she severely pussywhipped his ass. You know, there we'd be, riding home together, making sure we didn't look at anyone too long, lest get a shiv between the ribs, and we'd talk of the usual bullshit- sports, politics, movies, but he'd call me 'Uncle Gene', which didn't sit real well with me, although I never said anything because I guess he intended it as a sign of respect, or something. So, anyway, then one day I notice he's no longer taking the same train as me, but I think little of it. Maybe he's sick. Then, a week or so later Doris calls me and tells me that Eugene has left Dorothy and the two kids- Billy and Margaret. I was stunned, shocked. I figured that there were money problems, or something like that, because Eugene was always talking about how tight things were in their household, despite him making a good living, I thought, working for the City as a Health Department honcho. But, no, Doris says, Eugene has left Dorothy for another woman. He apparently had a mistress from about six months after



he married Dorothy- some gal he worked with in his office, and he had been seeing her the last four years, and even had a three year old kid with this other woman. I was stunned, like I said, because Eugene- well, you've seen him in some family photos. I mean, he was such a wimpy nebbishy little shit. If you had told me that he would have ended up as some Lothario I would have busted a gut, I swear. I mean....well. Anyway....now, I guess, my point is that Eugene's leaving and destroying his family served no purpose, save for Eugene's sexual satisfaction, or at least I'd presume. But, if he was unhappy, why didn't he just be a man, speak up, and leave Dorothy in an honorable way, when they had just one kid, or none, or when he met this other woman? I mean, she was no vast improvement over Dorothy, after all. It seems to me that he had all the free will then, before doing what he did, as he would later. I mean, was it merely ballslessness on his part? And, if so, why did he suddenly get balls to do it? Now, it's been a few years since it all went down, but I doubt Dorothy is ever going to remarry. She's just not what you would call *the desirable type*. Don't get me wrong, I love her to death, but, you know.'

'I see what you're saying, but Eugene just seems like a slimeball.' Amy said. 'Or maybe infidelity's in the genes, too. Didn't you say he was from a broken home?'

'Yes, he was- but I don't think that such a thing as infidelity is in the genes. People get too carried away with trying to excuse their actions that way. Alcoholism, drug addiction, gambling, sexual perversions- no one's responsible for anything these days. It's a crock, I say. Anyway, what I was gonna say is that my sister's other kid, my nephew Jack- you met him last Fourth Of July, who's a couple years older than Dorothy; well, Jack was a good looking kid, a high school football and baseball star, and then he went off and joined the Army, and served over in West Germany for a few years. He's been married for many years to the same woman, Mary- a real pretty Italian girl, and they have two beautiful daughters and, you know, well- if you asked me, and really wanted an honest answer, which of the two men were more likely to stray, I mean, even though I love him like a son, I'd've said Jack, because I'm sure a good looking guy like him had alot more opportunities than Eugene ever did. Then again, maybe the fact that Eugene wasn't tossed all those opportunities to change his life was why he did what he did. I'm not making excuses, you see, just trying to rationalize this all out.'

Amy said, 'Well, that could explain it. Eugene might've very well seen this other woman as his only chance to get out of a marriage he didn't like, and who knows? Maybe Dorothy's a real bitch, behind closed doors, and Eugene acted out of desperation- not calculation, while Jack always felt he could do so at any time- have an affair, I mean, so the pressure to make a life-changing decision never reached his boiling point, assuming he was even ever unhappy with Mary and the kids.'

'That's a good point, dear. I hadn't thought of it that way- or, at least, that in depth. Still, I'm sure Jack had more opportunities, and, who knows, he may have taken them, but still stuck with the marriage. I'm not trying to portray him as a saint and Eugene as an irredeemable sinner, although I still think Eugene's a lying, weaselly, little slimeball.'

'Don't hold back your feelings, Gene.'

'I won't. Dorothy's a good kid, or was a kid- she's almost your age, now. But, you know, I still kind of miss riding the trains with old, dumpy Eugene. I'm sure that after he left my niece he switched his work schedule or something- maybe started taking a different train, because he didn't want to have to face me. I never saw him again. Imagine that. My mere presence altered someone else's decision, and all I had to do was be related to somebody else. But, this gets back to what Frank Glynn was arguing with the other guys. Who could have predicted a big thing like the dissolution of a marriage, much less the fact that a grown man would change the way he goes home from work simply to avoid feared embarrassment or condemnation, or even my merely not speaking to him? Would some higher power want to divine so petty a thing? If so, we're talking about one hell of a neurotic God, don't you think?'

She said, 'Yes, I guess you're right, Gene.' Then we rose as our stop neared for the restaurant we were going to eat at. We'd first take a stroll in Central Park, then settle down for some pasta, and maybe I'd treat my lovely wife to a ride in a hansom cab. As the train doors opened with a screech I looked down and saw a little green caterpillar on Amy's shoes. It must have been stuck there for quite a while, fiercely clutching on, motionless, in terror, having fallen from some treebox we passed under. I pointed it out to her, and instead of kicking it off she said she'd let it hitch a ride all the way to the park, then let the fates have at it. As we got to street level, and waited for a light, though, she noticed the caterpillar was gone. As the light changed she refused to move, and break her glare, as if she had lost something wonderful

and precious, until I grabbed her arm, looked both ways, and before the light changed again, dashed to the other side, where so many others have been.

# The Wrath Of Angelina Jolie

My mother once said to me, 'My grandmother once said to me that you can love fully without fully understanding.' It was said to my mother at a time of great distress and relayed to me at a time of no distress. Why it was I am still not sure of. I think my mother just needed to hear a comforting voice, and her own, in the form of her grandmother's. I was in no such need, but upon hearing it I smiled at my mother, knowing that the gesture, itself, was more important than any result it could have. After she said it she sat in her chair, watched *The Price Is Right*, and fell asleep. I went out with my friends to play war with his little plastic soldier, the kind that were popular when I was a kid. Nowadays this is not so. Kids play computer wars now. Anyway, after we were done liberating Europe from the Nazi scourge I came back inside our apartment and just stared at my sleeping mother, wondering if she were looking at her grandmother within, or just her mother? Was her saying reverberating within, or was it just me?

Sometimes dreams come at you with no regard to reality. I have trouble separating the two, and have had so from the time I was even younger than when my mother uttered her statement to me. The result was that I was eventually institutionalized. People think that it's a hard life, not knowing reality from the unreal. But, many people suffer from it, although not to the degree I do. They kid themselves into thinking they're smarter or prettier than they really are, and then craft a whole life of bitterness over the fact that they are not being treated the way someone as smart nor beautiful as they should be. I have never had that sort of break from reality, only the more classic kind. You know, hearing voices, having famous people talk to me. It is because of this fact that the tale I am about to tell you must come with a warning. That warning is that it may not be true. Oh, the feelings I felt were real, and certainly my cohort in the story is real, and I am almost certain that the facts of his life that I mention were true. But, everything else must be taken with a grain of salt. I hate that saying, but it's another one that my mother was fond of, although she never said it before nodding off. Oh, and one final disclaimer- I will be telling this tale professionally, in the third person.

Let me start it off right: One day, when I was....No, that is too pedestrian. If I were someone with the delusions I spoke of I might think that that was a

good way to start a story. I might even get a book deal. I could type in capital letters and whine and complain about how bad life in an institution is. I could say that I was a drunk or a sex addict, or lost my money to bookies and was beat up and spent months in a hospital recovering. But, that wouldn't be good. It is odd that I sometimes see things more clearly than anyone I've ever known, yet have had such problems in life.

Let me begin again: If there was a sexier woman that had ever existed on the planet Earth than the film star Angelina Jolie, then Todd Stiles would have loved to meet her. *Ok, good. This is a good start. I am properly and professionally referring to myself in the third person, in case you didn't know! Wait, I mentioned that already.* Failing that, there was no better reason for him to have been the head of her local fan club. ~~Fan clubs have a curious history in Western culture. It is reported that the first known fan club was for the English author John Dryden. Dryden was a poet who wrote....~~*No, that is too pompous sounding. I must strike a better balance between the fiction of the story and the, well- I have to make it real. Wasn't it William Carlos Williams who wanted poetry to be real? No, new, he wanted it to be new. Wait, that was Ezra Pound who wanted it to be new. Williams wanted it to be real. Real and new. Yes. This isn't poetry but I can go with those ideas. It's artistic license. Sometimes you Can learn too much at the classes they teach here. Onward.* Granted, that fan club consisted of just him and his friend Eliot Glee, who also lived at the *Learning Center For Adults*, but that's what made it all the more special- exclusivity. ~~Exclusivity is a-~~ *wait, reign it in.* The less people that are allowed to join something makes it all the more special. *Ah, that's a better fillip for the point made!* It was simple logic. Besides, there really weren't just two members, but three. Angelina Jolie, herself, had honorary membership. Todd had even sent her the official membership seal. He hadn't heard from her in the year or so since he mailed it, but he didn't hold it against her. She was an important lady, and a mother, and she was also seeing Brad Pitt, the movie actor. She was also involved in many charitable causes. When that Tsunami hit in the Indian Ocean it was Angelina Jolie who led the effort to save dying Asians. ~~When the Twin Towers fell it was Angelina Jolie who led the effort to save skyscrapers. When an asteroid was hurtling toward earth it was Angelina Jolie who-~~ *Ok, a bit over the top. Scratch that last one. Oh, and maybe the Twin Towers bit, too.* What Brad Pitt had over him he could not reckon. Looks, ok. But, certainly not intellect, and Jolie was nothing if not brainy. She wasn't just a

gorgeous body attached to a flawless face. There were many Hollywood stars for whom only that was true, but not for Jolie. This was why it was she, and not- say, Catherine Zeta-Jones, who was the one who inspired the fan club. But, even that fact had not been enough to move Todd. He'd actually gotten the idea of mailing Jolie her membership from Eliot, who years earlier, when they were both boys, had sent an official membership form from another fan club to the person the club was for- in that case the person was a local former tv news anchorman named Roger Grimsby. Eliot had even gotten a coffee mug in return from the man, and one day even got to meet him in person. Eliot helped Grimsby get some big story, which led to a crackdown on an illegal towing scam, and he had then kept in touch with Grimsby through the years.

Then, about ten years ago, Grimsby died, and Eliot fell into a funk. He was all alone in the world now, save for Todd and the center. When Grimsby died Jolie was not even a movie star. She was an unknown, a struggling actress is what they call it. Now she's rich and famous. It's odd the way that someone becomes famous, too. Had either Todd or Eliot seen her walking down the street, before she became a star, they would have probably thought she was a pretty college girl, but once fame is shone upon someone there is a change that occurs. The person who becomes famous usually stays the same, but the rest of the world changes about them. People act differently toward them- they want autographs, they want information about them, and their opinions on this or that. Now, what they do, what they eat, who they sleep with, are all part of a public discussion. The rest of the world becomes a gossip aunt, and thinks they have the right to tell someone how to live, Granted, that might be the price for fame and fortune, but the person themselves must not really change. And if they do seem to change, to people who knew them before they were famous, then maybe it's the star just being who they really were, and the rest of the world was not knowing who they were.

Anyway, with Grimsby long dead, Eliot was eager to join Todd's Angelina Jolie Fan Club. He and Todd, on their day out from the center, had gone downtown on a day they heard that Angelina Jolie was in town promoting her new movie. This was a change in their usual routine, as they more often than not argued over such trivia as the real world name of the character *Hong Kong Phooey*, or who would win in a fight between *Mighty Mouse* and *Underdog*. Not that either was that obsessed with the cartoons these characters came from, merely the ideas behind them. Once, when the two

men were teenagers, they had nearly gotten into a fistfight over the idea of who would have won a fight between *Frankenstein's* monster and *The Creature From The Black Lagoon*. As *Frankenstein's* monster was undead, Todd felt that there was no way the Creature could do anything to stop it. Eliot, however, felt that the Creature, as a nonhuman, could simply drown the monster. After all, it was killed by the farmer's with fire, so water could undo the monster, as well. As for Angelina Jolie, even though Todd was the President of the Fan Club, it seemed that Eliot was the more excited to see their object of affection. He adored her, and had all of her movies on DVD- from that one where she played the drug addict model to the one where she was that crazy girl with Winona Ryder. Yet, it was Winona Ryder who was crazy in real life. Although, Todd always told Eliot of the time he heard how Angelina Jolie used to have a thing for her brother. Incest was not cool. But, that was years ago. Now, she was as famous as any other woman on the planet- even Madonna. And, it was only a few months earlier that some magazine had said she was the sexiest woman alive. Eliot agreed, and added that she was the sexiest woman alive, dead, or ever to be; although the rumors of her breaking up Brad Pitt's marriage disturbed him. He had the usual male fantasies, and spent many a night touching himself over the movie star, but it was nothing sick, nor demented. He was not a stalker in the making, just a lonely man who had never known real love. After they had glimpsed her, though, Eliot would fixate on that moment when he swore she actually met him eye to eye and smiled, from approximately twenty-two feet away, just over seven yards! He recalled seeing her, in a sleek, shiny dress, exiting her hotel for some occasion- a rally for some charity she supported- one of many. That's when Eliot saw it. Angelina Jolie, sexiest woman on the planet, was not wearing a bra, and he could see her stiff nipples, on this sixty degree day, absolutely bulging through her red dress, as if begging for his eyes alone to notice and appreciate their rigid beauty. A part of him was entranced by her bosom's bounce, drawn to follow their nipples' every motion, like the old Mitch Miller follow the bouncing ball sing alongs from his youth. Then they, and she, were gone inside a limousine. He was more hooked on the evanescent movie starlet than ever before. Her nipples press against red fabric was one of his most valued memories. Todd, too, thought she was ravishing, but the moment of her nipples did not affect him as deeply, and secretly Eliot held on tightly to the fact that he, alone, was Angelina Jolie's biggest fan, even more so than its Fan Club's President. He

was entitled to his belief, whether right or wrong.

*That seems a pretty good section, not too heavy on the adoration. And the theme of the nipple as, well, symbolism is good. The Mitch Miller reference might date the story, though. No, if the narrative is strong enough it can stay. The Grimsby backgrounding works. It sets up a little about the two protagonists. Now, there needs to be conflict.*

Yet, this fact caused a schism between the two friends. They had made a pact that if they were to ever meet their object of affection that Todd would be first in line to get her autograph. He was the President, after all, while Eliot was just the Treasurer. For good or bad the day they saw Angelina Jolie's nipples was not that day. But, how that day would ever come remained a mystery for the longest time. That was, until, one day, Todd came across a website on the center's computer. It was a site put up by this independent filmmaker named Ron Boris. Boris had directed many episodes of syndicated television, some tv and documentaries in Europe, and made a number of failed films. Well, *failed* was too harsh a word, perhaps. They simply lacked distribution, and their budgets were so low that the term *shoestring* was too much. He did manage to coax a pal of his, a famed B film actor, to star in one of his films. Regardless, it was on Boris's site that Todd came across the fact that he had been a second assistant director on one of Jolie's blockbuster films, and, in fact, had several photos taken of himself and Jolie posted online. How lucky this director was. So what if he could never get the financial backing to make his dreams a reality. He had been hugged by Angelina Jolie, and she even signed one of the photos, *Love, Angie*. Who knows, perhaps he had even caught her at a weak moment and gotten to nail her. Jolie was known for her libido.

'Aha!', said Todd, as he knew he now had his *in* to meeting Jolie. Luckily, Boris's studio was in Manhattan, not far from the Learning Center, so Todd and Eliot planned their little expedition to seek out the man they were sure could put them in touch with Angelina Jolie. They found and coordinated bus schedules, for they too feared the subways. Two weeks after discovering Boris's site, and sending a few polite emails, Todd had wrangled an invitation to the filmmaker's studio under some pretense of being a possible investor. He was certain that once he flashed his fan club credentials Boris would give them the address and phone number of their beloved. That morning, the two of them trudged up the seventeen flights of stairs to Boris's apartment, and rang his bell.



~~From behind the door came a muffled, 'Who the fuck is it?'~~

*Ok, now that part is true, but let me rewrite it. A writer need to know when to add the perfect touches and when to not add them- touches I mean. Here goes:*

~~From behind the door came a set of eyes that could only be gleaned through the peephole. Yet, immediately, he knew they were the craftwork of ruins too long ago to be counted. What Aztecs of his past had-~~ *No, no, much too melodramatic. What am I thinking. Let me go back to the original:*

From behind the door came a muffled, 'Who the fuck is it?'

'It's Todd Stiles. I emailed you about yourself. I'm here with my friend Eliot Glee, just like I promised. You said you'd speak to us and show us around your studio.'

'What? What? Oh, wait. Now I remember. What time is it?'

Eliot said, 'Nine o'clock.'

'Nine?' said the voice, 'but it's still daylight out. It can't be nine.'

Todd said, 'Yes it is. It's nine am.'

'AM?' said the voice, as he unlatched his door and opened it. Before Eliot and Todd stood a disheveled man in a short, tan bathrobe that hadn't been washed in years. 'AM?' he repeated. 'I said to come at nine, but I meant the night.'

'Oh, I'm sorry, but we can't be out after seven pm. That's the rules.'

'Rules? What the hell are you two- ' Then, Boris saw that Eliot and Todd were not fully mentally competent, and his tone changed- in an almost comic way. 'Oh, yeah, sure, sure. You ain't allowed out after seven- *seven PM!* I should have known you were bullshitting me about investing.'

As the three men stood across from each other, over Boris's threshold, Boris finally invited them in.

He said, 'Look, you guys, I was under the impression that you was- um. well, nor- uh, well, um....film students. Yeah, film students. I'm always one to give back to the- '

Todd said, 'I'm sorry I lied to you about why we wanted to see you, but I think you'll understand once I've explained it all to you.'

Eliot said, 'Hey, Mr. Boris, did you know that you have pictures of naked ladies on your wall?'

'Of course I do. They were actresses for me. I do 'art films' on the side. Just to pay the rent. I don't do them under my own name, though.'

Todd said, 'Oh, like porno?'

Boris exhaled deeply, 'Well, um....*yeah*.'

'Well,' said Todd, 'I have a confession to make. Me and Eliot aren't film students.'

'No, *really*?' said Boris.

'No, it's true. I guess I contacted you under false pretenses. Like I said, I'm sorry, but we do have really urgent business with you. We are really the heads of the Angelina Jolie Fan Club. I'm the President and Eliot is the Treasurer.'

'And you want me to join?'

'No. I mean, you can, if you pay a dollar fee.'

At that, Eliot held out his hand.

Todd continued, 'But, we came to see you because I saw pictures on your website with her, and we wanted to know if you could introduce her to us. Last year I mailed her a membership to the fan club, considering it's named after her. But, she's been too busy to write back.'

'I see,' said Boris, 'and you want me to smooth things over for you.'

'Yes, that's right,' said Todd, nodding approvingly to Eliot, '***smooth*** things over for us.'

'Well, I'm sorry to disappoint you boys, but can't.'

Eliot said, 'We can pay you.'

Boris said, chuckling a bit, 'No, no, that's ok. I think I'm doing ok on the financial side of things. But, I don't know Angelina like a friend. I just worked with her for a single day, and the only reason she posed for those photos on my website was as a favor. I was trying to impress my girlfriend. Well, ex-girlfriend. But, Angelina takes photos with anyone on the crew that asks. She's a terrific lady, not one of those prima donna types.'

Todd smiled, happy that his opinion of his beloved was confirmed, but Eliot was dour.

He said, 'You mean you're not friends with Angelina Jolie?'

'Oh, hell no. Big stars like her want nothing to do with little guys like me, at least, personally. What, are you kidding me?'

Eliot said, 'But she's so beautiful and sexy. She's always helping out poor people, and things like that. She's a wonderful person. Almost like Mother Teresa.'

'Mother Teresa? Yeah, well, she was a real bitch. You should read up on things before you make such sweeping generalizations.'

At the utterance of '*sweeping generalizations*' Todd and Eliot looked at

each other nonplussed.

Boris said, his tone now less friendly and more aggravated, 'And you shouldn't make assumptions, and be more specific when you talk with people you don't know. I mean, you boys are about twelve hours early in my book. Maybe you should run along home to the asylum and get some rest.'

Todd knew from the tone of his voice that Boris was now condescending to him, and resented it.

Eliot said, 'But, how will we ever meet Angelina Jolie if Mr. Boris can't help us?'

Todd shook his head negatively in silence. The three men just stood by the front door of Boris's apartment and said nothing.

Boris, sensing that he had hurt the two men's feelings, said, 'But, hey, why would you want to meet that actress, anyway?'

Eliot said, 'Because she's the most beautiful and kindest lady on the planet.'

Boris replied, 'No, she ain't. I mean, like I said, she's a nice lady, and sure, she's sexy as all get out, but you don't get to be a big movie star without having some attitude, too. And all that stuff you read about her breaking up that marriage between Brad Pitt and Jennifer Aniston- all true.'

'NO!' said Eliot and Todd together, their mouths agog. Eliot even started shaking, and what seemed a velvet tear rolled down his disappointed cheek.

'Yeah, it's true. In fact, I could tell you a story about Angelina Jolie that would forever change your opinion of her.'

'No,' said Todd.

Yes, so he did.

Boris said, 'So, we're taking this break on the set, and I'm talking with one of the lighting managers about a short that's upcoming. So, Angelina's in a bit of a pissy mood, and wanting some coffee. She's shaking this coffee machine that she put a quarter into, and cursing up a storm, because it's not working. So, I went over and said, 'Angie, baby, don't stress out.' Then, she gives me this look, and says, 'Oh, fuck off, Ron.' Then she walks away, back to her trailer, and some of the guys start laughing, and she gives them the finger. It was that time of the month, you know what I mean?'

Neither Eliot nor Todd knew what he was talking about, and the fact that the F-word could pass through their goddess's lips seemed to stun them. Boris then went into further detail telling them of some less than savory aspects of Angelina Jolie, but the details are not really the sort of thing I like to take part

~~in. As a person who believes someone is innocent until proven guilty, I preferred to think the best of Angelina Jolie, and blame the tale on the spiteful nature of Ron Boris. Oh, wait- I've violated the third person. Let me go back-~~ Boris then went into further detail telling them of some other less than savory aspects of Angelina Jolie, but Todd and Eliot preferred to think the best of Angelina Jolie, and blame the dark tale on the spiteful nature of Ron Boris, whom they felt had an 'attitude'. As they left, a while later, after Boris had showed them through his apartment and studio, a bit shell-shocked with the claims made against their idol, the train ride was not what they thought it would be.

Todd said, 'Do you really believe all that?'

Eliot said, 'I don't know, but Mr. Boris seems to be a credible man, of sorts. But, he may have been angry at us for coming early, and lying to him, to boot. Even the most credible of people can lie, if angry.'

'I think that's it. I really do. All he said was just so out of character for her.'

Todd started scratching his side, then noticed the bulge above his too-tightened belt. He hated the fact that he had love handles. He saw this as a great impediment to him ever having a shot with Angelina Jolie. Of course, now he wasn't even sure he wanted that. The fact that his left love handle was always larger than his right, no matter what he weighed, was also a cause of puzzlement. But, it was not the sort of thing to obsess over.

He said, 'You know, there are other movie stars.'

'Like Julia Roberts,' said Eliot.

'Too big in the teeth area. Maybe that Jessica Biel girl.'

'Who?'

'From *The Texas Chainsaw Massacre*.'

'Oh yes, I've seen her. She even replaced Angelina Jolie as the sexiest woman alive. I saw the latest issue of that magazine last month'

'Let's be her fans.'

'And drop Angelina Jolie?' asked Eliot.

'Yes, she has Brad Pitt, anyway.'

'Ok, but I'd prefer Claire Danes.'

'Why?' said Todd.

'I don't know. I just do. I think she's a *thinking man's sex symbol*.'

'Let's think it over, though, before we make any rash decisions. After all, I think we owe such a major decision such thought. As members of her fan club we need to research Ron Boris's claims, before we drop Angelina Jolie.'

If it's true, then Claire Danes it is. If not, then we ignore his vicious rumormongering.' said Todd.

'I agree,' said Eliot.

As they had several more stations to go before they would get back to the center, the harshness of what they had heard about Angelina Jolie seemed to fade, as did all that came after it. At their station it was as far from their minds as a leaf from last autumn. The coming afternoon would be filled with more to worry about. It always was.

# The Immaterial Return Of Travis Dietz

North, Bertram, Texas, 11:30 PM

Travis Arlen Dietz was not the sort of person who liked using his celebrity to his advantage. He didn't even like using it to help a good cause, but he was always being requested to do this or that for some group or charity, merely because he was the most famous person ever to hail from the tiny town of Bertram, Texas. It was a claim he never made for himself, but all the town leaders wore that fact with pride, despite the fact that he lived over a thousand miles away in the mountains of Northern California. Travis could never get over the fact that he was well respected, as he had spent the better part of his early years the sort of fellow everyone overlooked. He was not particularly anything- not too tall nor short, not too fat nor skinny, not too handsome nor ugly, not too rich nor poor. He was the sort of person who just faded into the background of a person's memory. Surely, there was no reason he suspected that of the nearly seventy kids that graduated from his high school class he would be the only one anyone would ever hear of. Yes, there was Albert Morgan, the doctor who worked up in Salado, but aside from his own patients, that was about it for Travis's only rival in name recognition. Still, he had always suspected that the pride the town of his birth claimed over his existence was more due to the fact that two of the more powerful men in local politics were also old school friends of his- Frank Moyle and Ted Deist. Moyle was a local powerbroker, never seeking office, but one of those gray men who are behind the scenes in everything, the Little Jack Horners of their worlds with two hands full of thumbs stuck into every pie they could get near. Deist was a powerful member of the local school board, and had failed three times to win the mayoralty of the town, not because he was not well liked enough, but because he always felt it was a good thing to be known as a person who was 'too honest' to be a politician. This was as good a cover as any that a man could use in his profession. It had been years since Travis had seen either man, but when they called a few weeks ago, and offered to hold a parade in honor of his expected third nomination for a Pulitzer Prize, something in Travis agreed to the festivities, although he insisted there be no great ceremony- no giving of keys to the city, and no day

named in his honor.

As he flew into the Austin area, he recalled his youth with the two boys. There was just something about this part of Central Texas that always stuck with Travis. It wasn't the people, Lord knows. To Travis Dietz the people of the area were its least desirable quality. Not because they were bad people, but because he found a slothfulness in their approach to life. There was an unquestioning acceptance of whatever it is some snake oil salesman was peddling: religion, politics, some get rich quick scam. Plus, that area of the country knew him before he became 'Travis Dietz, Internationally Published And Awarded Author.' Even though it had been decades since he actually lived there, within the Bertram city limits, he could never get the area completely out of his system. He seemed to be obsessed with it, as all of his fiction was set in this area. The hills of the Hill Country, which started just a few miles south of the town, sang to him of his lost days. Travis was not the nostalgic sort, normally, but even he had to admit that certain things affected people in ways they did not desire, and often in negative ways. The Hill Country had affected him, bewitched him, even, to the point that he felt, and even stated in some high profile magazines, over the years, that Central Texas was like his own White Whale, and no matter where in the cosmos he was physically, it would always be at his center.

It's a curious thing, if you really ponder it, how someone can be so reserved about their own accomplishments, and place in history, yet others go all crazy about it. There seems to be some odd desire within most people to need to celebrate their own. Not for anything in particular, but just to feel that they accomplished something as well. Travis could have saved children from a burning orphanage, or won an Olympic medal, or become a movie star who bedded different starlets every night. Whatever it was, there would have been someone with the desire to celebrate his 'accomplishment'. That the reason was his success in selling books, for the masses really were clueless that there actually was quality to his work, did not really matter, and it was for this reason that Travis felt a deep skepticism about the whole event he had agreed to.

Perhaps the only real soul from Bertram to even remotely rival his fame was the late sculptor and folk artist Garrett Wilkinson. While Wilkinson was noted around the state for his sculptures, especially his famed *Junkasurus Wrecks*, which stood in downtown Bertram, at the corner of Vaughn and East Streets, Travis's books were in all the major bookstores around the state and

the nation, and he even had a great fan base of readers overseas- particularly in Germany, France, and, oddly enough, in China. On the base of the spare parts sculpture stood a sign which read: 'Two oil pans, 104 spark plugs and a windshield wiper motor, later, the late Garrett Wilkinson had created the skull of this spare parts dinosaur (his second). 512-355-2911 Garrett Museum'. The questionable syntax, however, seemed perfectly attuned to the very nature of the art form that defined the town Travis had left after high school. While Wilkinson's work was noted in some local books, like John Kelso's *Texas Curiosities*, Travis's novels were twice before this year on the short list for a *Pulitzer Prize*, and once for a *National Book Award*. That he had not won either prize, which was considered a literary travesty by most of his fans, especially since lesser lights had won both prizes. Yet, there were critics who called Dietz a 'soulless writer', a 'technically brilliant writer', but one who lacked any deeper insight into life, much less true empathy for mankind. His fans thought this merely the typical backlash that delirious sorts who felt 'emotion' meant whining in a book over being raped or incested, not skillfully and impartially rendering the contours of an emotional landscape. People who really appreciated good writing knew that he was the best writer the state of Texas had ever produced, at least the best that was still living, although fans of Kinky Friedman might disagree. But, even the unreserved Friedman had said that the prize committees had jobbed Travis out of his due for reasons that had more to do with the Left Wing politics of the groups than with the sterling prose of Travis's pen. The men, while rivals of a sort, in terms of Texas pride, which was one of those things like Jesus Christ's loaves of bread- unending, wrote in entirely different realms, so were not prone to the personal sniping and pettiness that most writing rivalries consist of. Friedman was very political and involved in the current events of the day. His work was pedestrian, for the masses, and regularly appeared in newspapers across the state, and a few nationwide. One might claim he was to Texas what Mike Royko was to Chicago, or Jimmy Breslin was to New York. Travis was more of a true throwback- a highly literary writer of the sort back when the ambition to write 'the great American novel' was king, or 'a writer's writer', as some in the press dubbed him, often with disdain that, in a time of perceived cultural relativism, he sought out art for enlightenment and pleasure, as justifiable ends in themselves.

Travis had written a number of books- novels, short stories, and even some history books, about the greater Austin area. Yet, despite that fact, he had



never written specifically about the Hill Country- the small towns, the people, the customs, the laconic approach to life that teetered on a totter with a deep religious abidance. This lack in his literary career, this 'lacuna of the personal', was what one critic dubbed it, seemed to be something that left many other critics dispassionate about Travis's work. No one could question that his wordsmithing was shorn of clichés and that he had a brilliant way of conceiving stories, characters, and the like, but there was a sense that he was a writing technocrat, and someone whose tales were a bit soulless. Travis always responded that that was his style, that he saw the world as a material thing filled with nothing deeper, but he understood why this was perceived as a flaw, by some. So, he resolved that his next book would be a deeply personal, and emotional work. Whether it would be short stories, memoir, or a novel, he was not sure. He only knew that the best way to tap into that last remaining unexplored avenue of his creative self was to return to where he had started from, and that the sights and sounds might reinvigorate that part of his closed life that was needed to loose forth a powerful emotional response in readers. This was one of the real reasons he was returning to his hometown, to research the area thoroughly, and round out his long résumé with such a book, not because of some honorary ceremony thrown and attended by people he had mostly never met.

Many readers and critics had compared his work to William Faulkner, who set all his tales in a fictional county of Mississippi, but Travis thought Faulkner was vastly overrated, and did not revel in the comparison. While few could accuse Faulkner of being a bloodless technocrat, or the like, the extreme that he represented did not appeal to Travis's sensibilities, either. Where Faulkner gleefully indulged stereotypes at virtually every instance, in every story, in every scene, Travis's characters were all too real. This chilling verisimilitude, too, he suspected, was another thing that distanced himself from many readers. If a person can see a bit of themselves in a character they are likely to be hooked, and read on, and pass the work along to a friend, but if they see too much reality, too close up, where the very pores and blackheads of life take center stage, then readers are repulsed, because they deal with the close-ups of their own failures every day they gaze in a mirror. Travis's work was too close to the essence of most people, and thus they instinctively tried to disconnect from what they saw. While one could claim this powerful aversion was evidence of Travis's great talent as a writer, it did not help sales skyrocket to levels where lesser writers like John Updike or

Toni Morrison resided. In that sense, he far preferred being compared to William Kennedy, who set all of his books around the capital of New York State, Albany, and while was well known, was not a mega-selling author. That Austin was the capital of Texas only made the comparisons all the more apt to many. Travis had actually met Kennedy, several times, at book events and the like, and liked the man, especially when they went out drinking together.

*'He's a writer with balls!'* was another quote that Travis was famed for, when he stated it of Kennedy, and he was surprised and flattered when Kennedy's publisher contacted him to ask if the quote could be used as a blurb for an upcoming biography of the author that they were planning to commission. Although he had many ethical qualms about the whole idea of blurbing, for he felt the writing alone should be used to promote and sell a book that was good, Travis agreed. Kennedy was too good a writer to not be associated with, and had said kind things about him and his writing in the past. Yes, he knew this was little different from the cronyism he despised in the industry, but quality absolves all, in the long run. This was the difference few others could reckon, and he clung to it fast and hard. As for the industry and his relative snubbings in the awards game? It was all political, the critics who championed him claimed, and Travis knew that, too, was true. Still, he had a good reliable audience that he could sell just about anything he wrote to, and while none of his books ever sold a million copies, nor rocketed to the top of the bestseller lists of old line places like *The New York Times*, nor online venues like *Amazon.com*, he averaged a good two hundred thousand copies sold a book, over the last decade, and was thus able to make a more than decent living by writing and publishing a book every year to year and a half. He took pride in the fact, though, that he never published just to publish. He saved his money, just in case he ever came down with writer's block. He saw this desire to publish just to wring every last cent out of his brand name as evil. It had been the downfall of Joyce Carol Oates, who once had some literary potential, decades earlier, before she decided that every fart her brain she let loose was worthy of airing publicly. Even worse, he felt, were those books that authors published outside their realm of expertise. How could Eugene O'Neill, for example, not have been extremely embarrassed by his book of so-called poetry? Was he that clueless? No, Travis would never stoop to the pop cultural depths Oates did, nor would he sully his name like O'Neill did, and he was thankful his one child, Trevor, was a successful pharmacist,

and had not chosen to sully his literary surname the way John Steinbeck's son, Thomas, had his father's, in a desperate plea to milk the golden tit the father had made. Once, a few years back, at one of those literary conferences he detested, but which he had to shill his book at, he ran into the younger Steinbeck- in actuality only a few years his junior, and rightly chastised him for his greed and desecration of the family literary reputation. Steinbeck didn't care, and Travis felt sorry to see that at every level the corporatization of the publishing industry had sullied his craft.

He had flown into Austin earlier this morning, and rented a car to drive the fifty to sixty miles northwest to Bertram. He lived in California, now, in the northern part of the state- where it was rugged, and one could still have the illusion of the Old West. It was not that he was a sentimentalist in the Zane Grey fashion, just that the Old West, for whatever flaws it had, represented freedom, and that is something Travis, like all good writers, longed for- personally and professionally. And, in a sense, he had succeeded. His home was large, but not obscenely so, and his ranch was only a few acres. His life was free, and some might say lonely. He never married, and had no children that he did not know of. Trevor's mother was a good woman whom he had blown the relationship with, but she did not get all righteous and vengeful against him, as many women are wont to do, and even let Trevor have his father's name. Travis was a careful man, who sometimes regretted that fact, and wondered if his life would be happier, fuller, had he a passel of kids to wait on him in his approaching dotage. The breezes that blew in from the Pacific always made him look westward, and he wondered how many people in the future would feel such things? Only words, he felt, which are the ultimate abstractions concretized, could truly transport a person across space and time. Images and sounds, even smells- which subliminally trigger the fiercest memories, could not have the same power as words, for what smell could mean remotely the same things to dozens or hundreds of people? Words, however subtle they affected a reader, could always move them in the same general way. It took a maestro of the abstract to conduct this symphony properly.

California, at the edge of the world, seemed to represent the worldly limits of imagination, and he desired such, as he aged. Even though Texas was larger in area than California, it seemed much more tamed to him, with malls spreading everywhere. This, despite the metropoli of the Bay Area, Los Angeles, and San Diego. The commercialism of current times gnawed away

at him, but there was little he could do. Travis was not an idealist, but a realist, although many people automatically equated realism with idealism's opposite- pessimism. Travis harbored no illusions that his books would change people's thinking. Hell, if ancient books of religious thought, like the Bible and Koran could not stop people from their errant and selfish ways, how could any novel- his or any other writer's? Books simply were not miracle workers. They were ideas, they were syllabi, at best. Yes, perhaps a book of his would one day affect a future world leader, but that's about the best any artist can hope to achieve. That, and perhaps some future Mars colonist leafing through his words in a few centuries, and making some deeper connection. Not that Travis disliked comfort, and the rewards that selling books provided. It sure beat doing backbreaking blue collar work, which he had one till he was thirty, when his first book was accepted for publication, and took off, and he was able to quit his job and write full time. Now, several of his books were being adapted for film, as well, and he was making more money in the adaptations, and the selling of rights, than he ever had in writing and selling the books.

But, there was another reason he returned to Bertram. Tonight was the Fiftieth High School reunion of his Bertram High class. Before he had hit it big as a name writer, the most revered class in Bertram High history had been the 1933 class, whose Fighting Panthers football team went undefeated that season, and wound up the state high school football champions. This was a bit of trivia that Travis had forgotten over the years, until he stopped in that afternoon at *The Hungry Moose* restaurant, for lunch, and saw the old photos all over the back wall of that establishment. *The Hungry Moose* was not only a restaurant, but it was the town's Chamber Of Commerce, flower store, ice cream parlor, video store, and antique shop. It filled so many roles because so much of the town's stores had closed over the years. East Street was lined with closed shops, almost like a modern day ghost town, and many shops were only open a few days a week- like the *This & That General Store*, which was only opened Saturday, from 10 AM-3 PM, and Tuesday and Thursday from 3-6 PM. When Travis walked into *The Hungry Moose*, and saw the photo of the 1933 champs, he recalled another bit of trivia that was long hidden within, but which roared back to him. They were noted not only for their undefeated championship season, but also because their coach, Walter Reed, had tried something novel that season, insisting that the players not wear numbers on their uniforms, but letters. And there it all was, captured

on film, all the letters of the alphabet strewn across the chests of young men, most of them who would be near ninety if still alive, and not a single number. Perhaps writing of that team would prove the genesis for a book on the Hill Country? It was a possibility.

All of a sudden, the high school's old theme song came back to him:

*Hail to thee, our Alma Mater,  
Hail to Bertram High.  
Loyal hearts in us are beating,  
Loyal till we die!*

*See the colors proudly flowing,  
Dear Maroon and White,  
While we're marching on victorious  
While the Panthers fight!*

*Praise the chorus, speed it onward,  
Praise her to the sky.  
Hail to thee, our Alma Mater,  
Hail to Bertram High!*

Of course, many years ago, when Travis's first book to hit the big time broke, his class of 1956 quickly supplanted the 1933 state football champions as the most storied in school history, due solely to his own name's value. Some 1933 alumni, especially on the football team, came to resent his success, at least to the extent that it overshadowed their minor claim to fame. Oddly, the fact of his celebrity's power did not sit well with Travis, himself. Why was there such a cult of celebrity? After all, even though he was a well known author, and countless wannabe writers would kill to have his name level recognition, if not literary output, his wattage as a 'star' was maybe one ten thousandth that of your typical Hollywood starlet. No one cared of his love life, and no tabloids hounded him, yet there he was, the sole reason his otherwise anomic classmates had reached the heights as the most noteworthy of his school's alumni. That all this was due to his writing, or really his literary stardom, was a bit overwhelming, and so was the fact that the town had wanted to name a street after him, a few years earlier. He declined, saying that a sculptor like Wilkinson, who had stayed in town all his life, and whose family still resided there, deserved it far more than he did. In fact, he had received a letter from the town stating that they would honor his wishes,

and the next time they wanted to rename a street they would name it after Wilkinson. He even received a letter from the sculptor's daughter, one Charlene Vaughn, thanking Travis for reaching out to help a deserving, but less well known, fellow artist.

It may surprise some that someone would go to the trouble of sending a thank you letter to him, but is a myth, that many artists like to both tell themselves, and propagate to the non-artistic masses, that all artists love to help younger and talented artists succeed, but it's not true. Envy is the overwhelming rule, and the selfless actions of an artist like Travis Dietz, to actually go out of his way to help someone who was not a crony, nor a lover, was very rare. It was so rare that even if Travis had not been a great writer, himself, his acts of altruistic kindness toward Wilkinson and many others would still have made him a significant figure in the arts. Of all the thousands of pieces of fan mail he had received, over the years, it was these sorts, like the letter from Charlene Vaughn, that most made him realize the true impact art, and good art, had on people. Even if he had not the plain old love for wordplay and storytelling that he did, the fact that his work could move people, and right small wrongs, was satisfying to him.

On the way driving up to Bertram, on his car radio, that morning, he heard of a small airplane crashing into one of the local dams, and the fact seemed to root itself deeply inside of him. He recalled other things, old and new, which rooted in him, from a recent silly argument he had with a postal clerk, when mailing off his latest manuscripts to an old horror. The clerk claimed he was not allowed to meter mail, even though Travis had had some manuscripts metered just three days earlier. The clerk had simply wanted to lazily avoid doing more work, so lied, and these facts rankled Travis. Yet, that it so deeply disturbed him also puzzled him. After all, the radio said that several people had died in the plane crash, whereas a snotty postal clerk is par for the course. Then, there was the other, older memory, of driving on an unlit road, when he was in his twenties, and hearing a whimper, as his vehicle thudded over something. It was a small dog, out in the middle of nowhere. It must have jumped in front of the lights of his car like it had a deathwish. It was already dead by the time Travis reached it. Why it jumped in front of his car was less galling to him than that its owner was not bound by some leash law, and the dog had suffered for that fact. All he could do was push it off to the side of the road, for there were no homes nearby.

Yet, the dead dog stayed with him, and made him extra careful when he

drove, even to this day, and especially at night. Hearing of the plane crash brought these two disparate memories back to him with such a clarity that he was afraid his emotion might cause another accident, so he pulled to the side of the road, took some deep breaths, and decided he needed to get some good memories into his system. This was when he decided that he would visit one of the few relations he knew still lived in Bertram- a second or third cousin named Florry Kelso. He was unsure of their actual connection, but recalled their play as kids, and the fact that, when he was eighteen, and she some years younger, they had shared their first kiss together, back behind a toolshed where Florry's dad lived. She might have been only eleven or twelve, for she looked younger than he did, but she had developed early, and in those days people did not look down upon an especially well developed girls acting older than they were. It seemed just a natural way to be. The fact that she also had let him fondle her naked breasts was another reason he had good memories of her, and decided to look her up.

Before he stopped there, though, he drove by the old Bertram Nursing Home, on Route 29, where his own mother had spent the last few years of her life. He had supported her with a small monthly stipend, to supplement her Social Security, Medicare, etc., and he had also given some money to the Home, in the form of donations in the name of certain ideals and causes he supported, never in his own name, though. He simply felt it gauche to take credit for things that any person of means should readily do. He just felt a need to drive by the Home, that day, for that was where his last images of his mother were made. The home he had actually grown up in was long gone, torn down when they expanded Route 29 some years ago, so the Nursing Home of his mother was a *de facto* replacement for his youth, in a way no asphalt could ever be.

Then he drove by the City Hall, which was a building smaller than his own living room was, and he saw an old woman he knew from his youth, Polly, still working there. He could not recall her last name, but did not stop to find out what it was, although his presence would likely have made her day. He then drove by the *Junkasaurus Wrecks* and the EMS ambulance, next to an old trailer home on east Street. He saw some folks going in and out of a *Dollar Store* up on Route 29, and as he did he recalled a moment, earlier in the day, back at *The Hungry Moose*, when a mother went to the restroom, and was carrying on a conversation with her little daughter who sat outside the restroom, eating some ice cream. The fact that not a single beat of their

conversation, about her grades in art class, was missed, neither by the mother's going to the bathroom, nor the daughter's eating of the ice cream, was what stuck with him. These were the sorts of small moments, needed to build real characters, not stereotypes, that he noticed and always put in his writing, that those dimwitted critics who said his work was lacking in soul missed. Perhaps, he cynically wondered, if the conversation had the mother douching herself as her daughter spoke of the woman's boyfriend molesting her, as she dribbled ice cream on her lips like cum....that would be the emotion those morons sought. Usually the attacks of the stupid rolled off his back, but this day, when he was to be honored, he felt he could lash out. But, not too much.

So, he drove over to where Florry lived. When he slowly pulled up to her home, on a gravel street north of Route 29, a mess of two or three dozen cats scattered quickly across the unmowed lawns and lost themselves in the hip high grass. He walked up to her door, banged on it, and a teenaged boy answered. He didn't recognize Travis, and Travis did not recognize him.

'Is Florry Kelso here?'

'Who's askin?' said the boy who was not quite yet a man.

'I'm her cousin, Travis. Travis Dietz. I'm in town for my high school reunion. Is she home?'

The boy said, 'Naw, she's out shoppin' at the *Dollar Store*. She should be back in a while, though.'

'Can I wait?'

'I guess so.' he said, and pointed to some Adirondack chairs that were still wet with dew. He walked over and plopped down in one, uncared of the wetness, and motioned Travis to join him. He did, although he sat on the armrest, to avoid the water in the bottom of the seat.

'Say,' he said, 'you that writer, right? The one everyone in town's always makin' a fuss over.'

'Yes, I guess that's right. But, I'm not that fuss-worthy.'

'Yeah, now I know you. Mama's always talkin' 'bout how you the only one in the family what's ever made it big.'

'Oh, so you're her son. Alvin? *Little* Alvin?'

'That's right,' he said. 'Although I ain't so little anymore.' He flexed his naked biceps. 'I wanna be a writer, too.'

'That so?'

'Yup. I write me poems and stuff.'



At that, he went quickly inside, got a notebook, and eagerly showed some of his poems to Travis, who read a few. They were horrible, self-indulgent pieces of tripe and sexual fantasies- not even passable rap lyrics.

Alvin asked, 'So, what do you think?'

Travis lied, 'I'm not a poet, Alvin. I write novels, stories. I would be wrong to pretend to be an expert in something I do not write. You know, you don't go to a foot doctor if you've got a sore throat.'

'Oh, that's cool. At least you honest that you don't know. Too many people are too ignorant, and shoot their mouths off about stuff they ain't got no clue about. It's sickening, I tells ya.'

'Yes, that's true.'

'What kind of stories you write?' asked Alvin.

'Oh, this and that. Novels, mostly.'

'I like stories, too. Poems are just easier, I guess. You know, you take a story, and then break up the sentences, and it's a poem.'

'Well, it's not really like that,' said Travis. 'That's why poetry is dying, today. It's an art, a craft, and must be practiced. Just breaking up a paragraph into lines isn't making a poem.'

'Thought you weren't no expert on poems?'

'No, but that observation didn't require expertise. You can tell a painter is great even if you can't paint yourself, right?'

'I guess,' said Alvin, 'Stories are easier?'

'Not necessarily. But everyone has stories. They may not be able to write them down well, or tell them themselves, so that they can make them so others want to read them, but we all have stories.'

'I got a story. Wanna hear it?'

'Sure.'

Alvin said, 'Well, the other week I had to go see a dentist, because I had this cavity that was achin' my teeth, you know? So, mama made this appointment with this dentist over in Liberty Hill. So, when I get there, this nurse takes me to the chair, you know? And she cleans my teeth and all, takes them x-rays, and then says the dentist will be in in a minute. So, I'm waiting, and when he comes in I'm shocked.'

'Why?'

'Because he's white.'

'Because he's white? I don't get it,' said Travis.

'Well, you see, I only been to the dentist a few times. My teeth are in pretty

good shape. But the few times I went I was on my dad's dental plan, so had to go down to Cedar Park, to this Doctor Baines. And he was black- you know, the dentist was a black guy. So, since he was the only dentist I ever had, in my whole life, up until this new guy, when I saw the new guy, I guess I just somehow figured that all dentists were black, and was surprised the new guy was white. I told mama about this, and she thought it should be something I should tell you, seein' she knew you were comin' up here in a few weeks, and was sure you'd drop by.'

Travis was taken by the fact that Florry seemed to know he'd stop by. He always got a Christmas card from her, and two years ago he'd seen a photo of her. She was still an attractive woman, and he wondered if she hoped that they could rekindle things when he visited. Why else would she be so certain he'd stop by to visit them?

Alvin continued, 'She thought it might be a good parable, or something, on prejudice. You know, like to show that all people can be prejudice in the weirdest ways- even a good sort of prejudice, y'know?'

Travis said, 'Well, you're right, the story does have potential, but you cannot make it merely about race, or to show that white people, or anyone, can be prejudiced. That's obvious to all. People don't like being preached to when they read. People mostly read to enjoy themselves, at least when they read novels; so a writer should entertain. Now, that doesn't mean you cannot enlighten, too. But, if the book is just telling you how to live your life, well, then folks may as well just read the Bible, you see?'

Alvin said, 'Yeah, yeah. I think I get what you gettin' at. But, like, how would I jazz up my dentist story?'

'Well, you could lay in the facts of the dentist you first saw being black as just a mere mention, then bring in the surprise aspect later. But, that isn't the only thing the tale should be about. There has to be an incident that, even if the real point of the tale is to show the main character's ignorance about the skin color of all dentists, moves the tale, and allows the reader to focus on that, even as the idea about prejudice slips in subliminally.'

'Ok, but how?' said Alvin.

'Well, tell me a little bit more about what actually happened between you and the dentist, or even some of the nurses, or whatever they're called.'

Alvin thought a moment, then said, 'Ok, I got it. I could, like add in all the things that were going on while they were operating, fillin' in my cavity.'

'Like what?'

‘Well, I had cavities on both sides of my mouth, on the upper half, so they gave me two shots on both sides, but the shot on the left side didn’t seem as strong, and I said this to the dentist. He said that it would be fine, but the difference when he started drilling was obvious.’

‘Were you in great pain?’ said Travis.

‘Well, the right side was fine, but the left side I could feel, but it wasn’t really terrible pain. You know? But, there was a difference, and I just clenched my fist over it. I mean, I grabbed the end of that chair fierce. And it wasn’t novocaine he gave me, but lidocaine, or something like that. Then, I remembered this song that was playing on the Muzak. That old Harry Chapin song, *The Cat’s Cradle*, or whatever, and I remember listenin’ to the words, and gettin’ sad, ‘cause it reminded me of my own daddy and all.’

‘Well, that’s something where the story could be successful. Perhaps the lack of a father figure led the main character to identify with the black dentist, and then there was the disappointment when switching dentists. The race angle could be sort of tucked in to the loss of father angle.’

‘Hmm....I can see why you’s a famous writer. But, there was more, too.’

Travis said, ‘Go on.’

‘Well, I also heard the dentist and his assistant talking about this ice rink that the assistant had gone to over in Caldwell, and then I remember that bright light they shine on your face, so’s they can see well in your mouth, and seeing the dentist and assistant looking down at me, like from the periphery, but their faces be upside down, see? And I remembered the old black dentist, and the spit sink he used to have. They don’t have them anymore in fancy dentist places. He used to smoke cigars, then spit into the sink, and I’d watch the brown slowly thin out and then go around in circles before it went down the drain. I used to think the spit sinks were like little toilet bowls. I used to even call’em *Leprechaun Toilets*, like after them little green folk from Ireland. I figured they’s was about the size of a toilet a leprechaun would use. But, now, jeez, it’s been years since I seen one of them little toilets. It’s a shame. I just liked watchin’ the swirls. Anyway, then I noticed all the flakes of like the enamel they was drilling from my teeth. They were flying above me and in front of the bright light they formed like a cloud, and I thought to myself that that cloud is really a cloud of Alvin, and well, it felt good. Weird, but good, y’know, in knowin’ a part of me was makin’ something’ beautiful, even if it wasn’t gonna last long.’

Travis said, ‘Well, I think you make more good observations than 99% of

published writers do. That's something that cannot be taught. All you need to do is learn to craft the words well. That can be taught, but it takes time.'

'So, you sayin' I should go to college?'

'No, no, not if you really want to write well. College classes are taught by people who have failed at their professions. Virtually all of the writing class teachers that I've known are bad writers themselves. I've been invited to teach at a few of these writing forums they promote, and I couldn't stand them. It's been about twelve years since I last went to one. I just couldn't stand the politicking and sycophancy; not to mention the bad advice and encouragement of people who had no real talent, just so that the courses or programs could get the money of these deluded, talentless wannabe writers. Anyway, you know the old saying, I'm sure, 'Those who can do, those who can't teach'? Well, it's true! You teach yourself, and when you run into someone who can also write, you bounce ideas off of them, too. I'd always be willin' to help you, just so you know.'

Alvin said, 'That's mighty kind, Mr. Travis, mighty kind of y'all. I may take you up on that offer sooner than you think.'

So, he left his email address with Alvin, asking him to never give it out, to which the boy agreed, and as Travis and Alvin talked, the older man felt a part of his perception of the world had been off. Alvin was no budding Leo Tolstoy, to be sure, but he didn't have to be to get some things that a work of great art could impart. Too many artists actively despised their presumed audience. They wrote only for a small group of people they felt worthy of their 'genius', so never stretched themselves to reach a wider audience, then bitched when no one cared about their masturbatory work, except for those few people they'd studied with, or slept with. Yes, he did not deny that most things were over the head of most people, but that did not mean an artist should condescend. A work of great art forces its audience to look beyond themselves.

He still believed that the vast majority of humanity was composed of mere placeholders, people who were holding spots for their forebears who achieved something, or their descendents who might achieve. This truth, though, did not mean they should be ridiculed and scorned in all ways, especially by the effete intellectuals of Academia. That person you sneer at could be the grandfather of the person who cures cancer, or discovers faster than light speed travel. Travis knew, from his earliest days, though, that he was the rare person whose life had been held in place by his forebears. All

their struggles were worth it when another person read his work and fundamentally understood something they had not previously understood. This was also why he never lived for his son's benefit. Yes, Trevor was a success in his field, but no amount of business success had a fraction of the worth that a life changing read of his novels or short stories could. Were he to leave, another pharmacist could step right in and fill prescriptions just as readily. To live for Trevor, despite his love for his son, would be an abject waste of his talents, and as selfish as that sounded, it was also the truth, since his art would give forth a millionfold more to the world than he and all his kin had ever taken from it. Travis felt justified in his belief that he carried, in his career's success, the useless weight, bulk, and dreams of millions of nobodies. Yet, he did not resent it, so why should they?

As he talked, Alvin seemed to doze off in the morning sun, and Travis realized that it was now nearing midnight, and all this was merely another memory. He had already seen and rekindled something with Florry, and she was coming out to California in a few weeks to see where things could go. He had gotten his honors from the city's officials, who declared it '**Travis Dietz Day**', throughout the town, even as he cringed over the declaration, and he had also gone to and returned from his High School Reunion, where, of course, his presence was made too big a deal over. He squirmed, stood for photographs, hugged and kissed former girlfriends, and schoolpals, and even some veritable strangers who claimed they were once intimates of his, even though they were not, or at least he had no recollection of such acquaintances. Yet, oddly, he felt not in the least bit phony, even as he knew it all was a sham of the sort he always loathed. This feeling of guiltlessness, however, was something new to him.

In fact, he felt, all in all, noncommittally about the whole day, even as he finally got into his motel bed, wearily took off his shoes and socks, changed into his pajamas, and recalled leaving the reunion early, walking across the unlighted football stadium, and thinking of what Alvin had said to him, and what it could all mean. He was hopeful, not just for the boy and himself, and not even just for the town nor literature, itself, but for something higher, freer, where the weight of his worries, he could feel, was starting another story within him, which would be a part of a book, this one that you read, right now. This impulse satisfied him to no end, as he knew what his dreams could make of it, and as he stared at his bare feet, set against the worn light-colored carpet of the motel room, he saw the greenness of grass stains upon

them, and a few stray blades, from when he took off the weight of things, especially his shoes and socks, earlier, and ran barefoot over the football turf, the leftover length of his past, not knowing nor caring one whit of it.

# Grace Is A Name Or A Thing

1940s

Sometimes a girl needs her daddy, despite all that is right with the world. I loved my daddy more than I can say. It was not that he was the best daddy in the world, nor was he the handsomest daddy in the world, and he was surely not the sweetest daddy in the world. But, the thing that set him apart from all the other daddies in the world was that he was my daddy. Nothing would ever change that fact, and that's what made him special to me. But, daddies are like all other things. Sometimes, a better daddy can come along.

Some people ascribe such sentiments as the bulk of what I've just related to my having a 19<sup>th</sup> Century soul, and a 21<sup>st</sup> Century Mind, but being stuck almost smack dab in the middle of the 20<sup>th</sup> Century. Whether or not this was true I do not know, but my feelings remained, no matter their cause. Others ascribed my optimism to where I grew up, on the West Coast, specifically the Northwest, but I don't see the connection, as so many days are overcast and drizzly that most folks feel rather depressed most of the time. Of course, I should have been more depressed than I actually was. Growing up in the years of the Second World War was always a strain on a poor family, especially those that lived out in the sticks that surrounded Seattle, Washington. These were the days long before personal computers and fancy coffee shops, and Seattle and its area basically survived off the lumber industry and apple orchards- and *The Boeing Corporation*, of course, which had been a major force in the area ever since William Boeing built his first airplane, back in 1916. The company, and the area, often boasted of being the nation's arsenal, that, were it not for our airplanes, we'd be speaking Japanese right now. This implicitly meant that there were many workers out here who did the jobs that men back East could never do, the real manly sort of work that gave rise to local legends like Paul Bunyan.

My daddy was a legend to me, and only me. Perhaps that was because he was gone so often that a child is then forced to create things to fill in the gaps that are apparent in real life. My daddy's absence from my life was not really his fault, though. You see, my daddy was a man of the people, and cared about everyone- especially those with less than others. Too much, in my opinion. I think had he spent more time caring about me and my mother, and less time caring about the rights of workers, or the Japanese who were interned in prison camps during the war, and especially less about the

damned Communist Party, he and my mom would have stayed together, and my childhood would have been a damned sight happier. Not that it was miserable, really, but it was certainly not what it could have been, what I saw other kids enjoy with their daddys.

This is all in hindsight, of course, and that's always 20/20, as they say. But even as a girl, I missed my daddy. I remember one time, when Billy Thompson tried to show me this big, pink nightcrawler he dug up out of the dirt, and held it up to my face, I cried out for my daddy to protect me, and even though he was off in Tacoma, at some union rally for this or that, I heard his voice inside of me say, 'You're bigger than that ugly worm, and all it is is a slimy thing. It can't hurt you, and neither can that impudent Billy Thompson.' I heard those words as clear as a bell, and daddy always liked calling Billy Thompson 'impudent'. So, I knew my daddy was with me, and slapped the worm out of Billy's hand and pushed him down to the ground. He was stunned at my physical reaction, as if a girl couldn't protect herself, but I just laughed at him as I walked home triumphantly as the kids who were with us made sure Billy would not soon forget his being beaten by a girl. I was no more than six or seven when this occurred, but my father's voice still is as clear to me as it was that day.

I guess it was such true clarity that only heightened his actual absences. Even before my mom and daddy split up for good, there was too little time I spent with him. Other people always seemed to *need* him, and as he had become a steward for several unions, he was always off to resolve some grievance or another. I could never understand why companies liked to harass their employees so much. It just seemed to waste so much time- my daddy's, as well as mine with him- not to mention get people angry and aggravated to the point that they could not work as well as they could if they were just left alone to do their work. It was almost as if the companies actually wanted strife, to make people miserable because they dared ask for fair wages and fringe benefits, and to be treated fairly.

This was pretty much routine. Then, when all the Redbaiting started, after the war, my daddy's life and reputation were pretty much destroyed. And when some *so-called* friends named him, to a Senate sub-committee, as an active organizer for the CP, well, that was all my daddy could take, being suddenly faced with seven years in jail, for being Un-American, and a life in shambles, or suicide. He chose suicide, and simply walked out a fourth floor window of a hotel in downtown Portland, Oregon. We heard about it the next



day, in the morning newspapers. All he left was a note that said, 'The window is my only option.' Yet, despite the sadness of it all, the damnable newspapers reported the story as if they were somehow glad that my daddy had done himself in. How they could feel that way about a man who had devoted his life to helping others was beyond me. If there was anyone with a right to gripe about my daddy it was me or my mother, not strangers who only told the most vicious lies about him.

My mom was upset by my daddy's suicide, but not nearly as much as I was. In the years between their breakup and divorce, during the war, and my daddy's eventual suicide in 1951, she had remarried a man named Larry McDuff. Their divorce was quite amicable, and I was glad that they had remained friendly. I was also quite happy with the fact that my daddy and stepdad got along well. On several occasions they even went fly fishing together in the eastern part of the state. As much as I loved my daddy, the truth is that I probably loved my stepdad as much, or more. It was for selfish reasons, of course. My stepdad was not necessarily a better person than my daddy, but he was there for me, whenever I needed a shoulder to cry on, or someone to stick up for me, like the time Billy Thompson tried to get revenge on me, for the nightcrawler incident, by pulling down my skirt in the lunchroom during seventh grade. My stepdad went to the principal and demanded that Billy be forced to publicly apologize for 'violating' me, and take six strokes on the behind, to boot. Billy was so punished, and after that I knew there was nothing my stepdad wouldn't do for me. I felt like I had been somehow blessed with two daddies, whereas other kids only had one. Ok, so my first daddy was defective. He still loved me, and I loved him, plus I got a second daddy for nothing, and he seemed to love me even more than the first one.

Then, one day, I was let in on a great secret. I would never have guessed that my stepdad was the sort of man who held secrets, but after hearing it I was convinced that his life was as interesting as most people found the life of my father, the Communist union man, if not more so. And the fact that I was sat down by my mom and stepdad, like an adult, and charged with keeping the secret, and never telling, only made me feel closer to my stepdad. It was as if we were co-conspirators, with my mom, and this was the sort of closeness I never felt with my own daddy. The secret was that Larry McDuff was not my stepdad's real name, and he had not been born in Virginia and raised out in Yakima, as I had been told. His real name was Eugene Walsh,

and he was born in Paterson, New Jersey, which explained his weird accent, as I had met people from Yakima, here and there, and none of them sounded like my stepdad. What had happened was that when he was stationed in the Pacific, and was involved in a firefight on Iwo Jima, he'd switched dogtags with a dead soldier who was getting his release from the service a few days later. ***That man*** was the *real* Larry McDuff, originally from Arlington, Virginia; ironically where they have the country's big military cemetery. His family had moved to Yakima when that Larry was a boy. Instead, in his place 'Eugene Walsh' was buried there, where the body of the real Larry McDuff moldered. As my stepdad had no real family to speak of he did not think that the switch was a big deal.

But, apparently, I learned, the family of Larry McDuff now had to believe that the real Larry McDuff was alive, but had never returned to them from the war, and while not officially AWOL, had somehow deserted them, for reasons no family could fathom. My stepdad felt great guilt over this, and even cried to me and my mom, one night, on Veteran's Day. He had wanted to write to the family of the real Larry, to explain to them, in detail, why he had done what he did. Larry, or Eugene, the man who was the stepdad I loved, explained to me that he had just gotten sick of war, and that after killing eleven Japanese soldiers in hand to hand combat, and who knew how many others from afar, he simply did not want to kill any more people, nor did he want to be killed himself.

He said, 'I guess I just never thought there could be moral consequences with the decision *to not kill*. I mean, any guy who's been at war a while will tell you there's only one type of hero- the guy who survives. Period. I survived, and that trumps all in my book. Still....I mean, all I really wanted was what we called a *Million Dollar Wound*, something bad enough to get me out of battle, and the service, but not enough to ruin my life. But, that never came. I was too damned lucky, I guess. Most men just get the cheap wounds, and they can kill you, 'cause the brass will send you back to the fighting without a thought for your life's worth. And, as this Larry McDuff was not going to need his release papers, anymore, what was the harm in allowing a living man to go home in his stead? It had to be fated. I had served his country, above and beyond the call of duty. I had learnt that my battalion was going to be one of those scheduled to invade the Japanese mainland, and I knew that would be a bloodbath I'd never survive. This was all before anyone knew that we were working on the atom bomb, of course. Had I

known that I might have stuck it out. But, that's all hindsight. I did what I did and it's done. It cannot be undone.

But, I've no shame, merely this one regret, about his, the real Larry's, family. After all, there will always be enough young men who love to destroy things, regardless of the reason, for if there weren't the armies of the world would die of boredom. It's not like I was Ike or MacArthur who decided to quit. I was only one grunt, and I'd killed enough. Some people act horrified when they hear about the Bataan Death March, or what the Nazis did, or the atom bomb, but to me I think it's just hypocritical. How you kill someone is of no importance. The important decision one makes is to kill in the first place, especially if it's just for some pointless thing, like a creed, a slogan, a leader, a country. Anything after that decision is just details. I simply decided not to kill anymore. Was that so wrong?'

But, regret lacerated his speech, and his voice cracked, it seemed, on every third syllable, even as he asked his question. As years went on, he never did contact the real Larry McDuff's family, for he first feared going to jail, and then feared the wrath of the family, who might not understand why he did what he did, and report him. They did not know what war was like, *how could they?* How could they understand that stealing their son's identity was not a crime, but a way of saving human lives- his and those other men he would certainly kill? He had known the real Larry McDuff only briefly, during the firefight when they first landed on the island, for only a few minutes. In fact, Eugene, my stepdad, actually saved the real Larry's life within ten minutes of landing on the beach, by pulling him out of the way of a bullet only Eugene heard coming. It may have been meant for Eugene, as the legend goes, but it was headed for Larry. In this moment, he felt that Larry McDuff owed him his life. And, the next day, when he found Larry's disfigured and almost unrecognizable body lying bloodied and rigid in a knoll of high grasses, his head blown to red pulp, and wholly unidentifiable, Eugene merely felt that since he had heard the bullet meant for him, it was only right, in a cosmic sort of way, that he, the real Eugene Walsh, should be the dead man the medics and graves registration unit found, and that Larry's release papers should not go to waste on someone for whom they were of no use for now. As most of both men's units were killed, it was not so hard to pretend he was the man who died, when the medics took the injured away. He had been wounded in the head, anyway- a graze, but it bled alot, so he pretended it was much worse, raved and pretended he did not know who he

was, nor what had happened to him and his squad. The boat that took him back to Hawaii, to recuperate from the bullet graze in the temple, was filled with injured new recruits that hadn't even a clue where Japan was, much less who was who. He spent his last ten days of the war in the Honolulu military hospital, then shipped home to Seattle, where he had requested to go, and there met my mother coming off the ship. She was working there with a local USO contingent, and the two fell madly in love after their first dance together. Any other details are for them to tell, of course.

Yet, while in Hawaii, Larry's, or Eugene's, guilty conscience got the better of him, so on his first night, he confided to the hospital chaplain about what he had done, and expected the pastor to shrive him with words of encouragement. Instead, the holy man berated him, told him he had fallen from grace, done an unconscionable thing, ripping a proper grief away from people who would never truly know what became of their son, whereas Eugene Walsh's family was all dead, and he never had siblings. Even though he asked for forgiveness, the pastor refused to give him absolution, and while the minister could not break his confidence to a penitent, for he would violate all the ethics of his profession, Larry- or Eugene- could not sway the man from his absolutist position. This was when he concluded that the people who make laws and morality are usually those who never have to face reality up close. He refused to be guilted by a man who had never even seen a man killed in action, much less done the killing, and refused to come clean about his actions, and when the minister shipped out, the next morning, he came by, one last time to plead with Eugene to do the right thing, but Larry, in a rare bout of anger, wished the chaplain dead. Then, a week or so later, the day before Larry was shipped stateside, news came to the hospital that the minister, and six other employees of the hospital, were killed when a kamikaze slammed into the side of the battleship they were on. Larry felt even more guilt, not just for his wish for the holy man, but for his initial decision that set all that into place. Yet, now he was home free, as other than me, my mom, and himself, that chaplain was the only soul who had ever known that 'Larry McDuff' was really Eugene Walsh, a scared kid from Jersey.

Larry, or Eugene, or whatever you'd care to call a man who was such a chameleon, was a good man, as had been my daddy, but since he really had things to hide, he led a much more low profile lifestyle than my outspoken, and somewhat naïve, daddy ever did, which meant he had much more time to

devote to me and my mom. We were the center of his universe, so to speak. The only thing that seemed odd about my stepdad was how often he looked at himself in the mirror, as if trying to sort out which part of him was the master of the mirror, and which part the imposter. Yet, now even that oddity made sense to me, as did the time he told me, when I asked him a question regarding a homework assignment I had on American liberty, that, 'Freedom means that one is not forced to lie.'

My daddy, on the other hand, seemed to always want to court trouble, to attack things head on, even if this was what ultimately led to his getting steamrollered by life. Although my daddy was never anything but good to me, a part of me resented him bitterly, for his extended absences, especially knowing that it was to help others, and not for selfish reasons. I know that sounds odd, but had he left me for a drinking habit, or a girlfriend, that would have been normal. I knew a few kids whose daddies did those things. They were despicable, but normal, reasons. So, it should not have surprised anyone that I took to my new stepdad very easily. All he wanted to do was work a few years, save enough money to buy a farm, and then live a simple life with my mother, the woman he adored, and....me. I was even eager for them to give me a baby brother or sister. Even though he never tried to denigrate my father to me, he always treated me as if I were his own flesh and blood. It was a curious thing. I had never experienced the gentleness and wisdom of a man like him before.

He said to me, one evening, after supper, in regards to why he loved me, 'When a man marries a woman they become of one flesh, or so the Bible says. And that is what your mother now is, the flesh of my flesh. And you are the flesh of her flesh, therefore we share her flesh, and are kin, and therefore I'll always love you as if you were my own daughter. To me, there is no difference.'

He was always saying deep stuff like that, to me, but with a profound respect and honesty that made things like that, which would sound silly from another man's lips, seem regal from his lips, and I think it was because he was intimate with death, and knew it could come at any second, that he did not want to let a true emotion go by without its utterance into the world. Nowadays, all one reads about all these pervert stepdads who physically or sexually abuse young girls their wives or girlfriends have. When I read such I am, of course, horrified, but when I try to imagine Larry, or Eugene, trying to do such a thing to me I cannot even complete the thought; so alien a thing is

such an act to me. He always loved me just as much as he said he would. One day, when some rich girls at school, pushed me into a creek, and soiled and wet my best Sunday dress, my mother had all she could do to stop Larry, or Eugene, from going to their family's home and beating up their fathers. He was enraged, to say the least. And I felt safe in his presence, like he was my own personal guardian angel. There were other times, too, that my stepdad showed me how special I was to him. Once, we went to a county fair. I forget where it was located, but we spent the whole day, and we saw all the animals, all the shows, and Larry, or Eugene, explained to me how the tricks were done, where the wild animals were from, and I recall never wanting to leave that place. To this day, when I see a clown or a midget, I recall the details of animal life or card tricks that I have no other use for than to remind me of my stepdad's love.

I recall, once, even my real daddy, not long before he killed himself, told me that the best thing he ever did in his life was to be gone from my and my mom's lives, as often as he had, because had he stayed with us we would never have had Larry come into our lives, and he was a far better man than my daddy felt he ever was, at least in regards to my mom and me. Of course, he never knew about Larry's switch of identities, and I've often wondered what he would have thought of it had he known, but I suspect that, as my real daddy had a great deal of respect for the good folk who are spat upon by society, especially those who do selfless things for others, he would have forgiven Larry, and understood why he did what he did, especially if he had heard Larry tell his tale as I did.

My own daddy used to tell me stories of his own growing up, and it was from these stories that I still have my best picture of the sort of man my father really was. It was his seeing men who worked in the lumber mills getting killed and maimed at an alarming pace that first alerted him to the callousness of most to other people's plights. When people would complain they would be fired or mocked. It was as if the price of a piece of wood was more important than the life of a man. Even a man who was uneducated and did little to improve his lot, was worth more to my daddy than a piece of wood. That man could smell a flower, smile at a beautiful day, laugh at a joke, and comfort someone else in a moment of grief. The wood was just a thing to be bought and sold, but it was the confusion of these destinies that most aggrieved my daddy. He had worked several summers as a teenager in the CC Camps up in Idaho, and there was where he met men from all over the

nation- boys from Brooklyn, rednecks from Georgia, cowboys from Texas, yet they were all Americans, as he was, and in them he saw a grand fraternity. He even grew to respect and like the Negroes and Indians he met, despite the color of their skin. They were oppressed, as much or more than the average lumber mill worker, and this realization was what drew him to Socialism. He had learned to love the land, nature, and his fellow man, but he grew to loathe the money men who 'knew the price of everything, but the value of nothing', as he used to say. That was why he finally joined 'The Party', as it was called, after some doubts over things he had read that were going on over in Stalin's Russia. He saw that the Communists were the only people who stood up for the rights of women, children, Negroes, Chinamen, Japs, and the little folk. But he was not one of those ignorant, diehard Stalinists. He spoke out at party meetings against the excesses he heard of in Russia, and urged the American Communist Party to sever ties with Moscow, and form an American Socialist Worker's Party that took the best of both Communism and capitalism, but was too often booed and shouted down. He was always more of a social justice Socialist, as he said, than a committed Communist, and felt life was better when people worked together for the common good. He felt that, after reading a book of the collected writings of Abraham Lincoln, that the Great Emancipator, himself, would have been a member of the Party had it been around in his day.

He told me that his first real paying job, after the CCC's, was as a janitor for the King County Courthouse, in downtown Seattle. He hated that job, and the degraded way the bosses treated the help. But, he was even more disgusted with the way average men handled themselves when they did what was needed. He never understood how men, especially, could be such animals when they did their nastiness. He would see men, in nattily attired business suits, go into stalls that he knew were clean, for he had just finished cleaning them, and a few minutes later he would see clogged bowls, or bowls where the seats had not been put up, so that the man's urine would splash out onto the seat, the man would not even wipe it clean with toilet paper, but just let it dry into a sticky yellow paste. He told me he figured it was some 'atavistic impulse', some return to the cavemen ways of marking territory with piss, like feral dogs, that all men indulged in. They just did it in the privacy of a bathroom stall, to hide the fact that they were nothing but upright apes.

That phrase, 'upright apes', was, incidentally, a phrase that my stepdad also

often uttered, especially when referring to the killing of war. He told me how the Japanese used to scream like something from darkest Africa, as they came attacking you with bayonets, and he could never understand how alerting an enemy that you were coming was a wise thing. After the initial shock wore off, the Japs were easy to kill. It made absolutely no sense to him, as a tactic of war, but he felt that there must have been some bizarre impulse in the Japanese mind that harkened back to the days of the cave that drove them to what could easily be termed a suicidal animalistic impulse. Of course, he also admitted that he was equally disgusted by his own actions, and those of the American and British soldiers. They were not as deranged as the captured Japanese seemed to be, but they would also engage in violent acts that made no logical sense, things he refused to discuss with me, for my youth.

He told me about his own 'incident' in a bathroom in a cave on an atoll, though, where his squad had torched out the insides. There, he and a fellow soldier had come upon a small, Japanese woman, in a dug out fort, sitting naked and shivering with fear as she squatted over a clay bowl used for excrement, and how he and his buddy could see the strands of feces below her squat, emanating from her rear, and how both he and his buddy just stood and watched her complete her bowel movement, before she screamed one of those horrible screams of imminent death, pull out what seemed to be a dagger, and rose to rush at them. Whether this charge was for their humiliating her by watching her defecate or whether she would have done so no matter, he did not know, for Larry, or Eugene, simply and calmly shot her straight through the forehead, killing her instantly, as the force of the bullet forced her to fall back against the cave wall, and her dead weight fell upon and broke the clay pot beneath her releasing all its foul odors and juices to their senses. He told me how the sight reminded him of these strange neighbors he knew, before he left for the war, and how they would not flush a toilet until the bowl was full, and how disgusting he thought it was to shit in a bowl filled with others' shit, especially if your poop plopped and caused the foul water to fly up onto your anus. Larry's face seemed to be more moved and disgusted by that memory than the more violent memory which triggered it.

Still, he could not understand why the woman did what she did, and did not simply give up, but when he would tell me things as this I slowly began to understand why he did what he did to get out of the war, and did not see any great moral crisis surrounding his decision- neither taking Larry McDuff's



name, nor killing the Japanese woman. It was obvious from their actions that they were not going to kill the Japanese woman, that they were even letting her finish her delicacies. Then, for her to turn so monstrous, it was not sensible. Life may be made up of little things that rarely matter, but when those that do leap out at you with such ferocity, it must seem awfully unfair to have to make such decisions so swiftly. Yes, he knew that the Japanese believed capture was a disgrace worse than death, but this was a woman, someone who may have had a child with her, or was a nurse. She had no duty to try to hurt them, especially since they showed her respect and kindness—even decency, and the thought of most American soldiers, about killing a woman, was repugnant. Yet, she was no more than a wild ape as she lunged at them. But, what was he, the real Eugene Walsh? He told me that even though the real Larry McDuff would have likely killed any number of Japs during his tour of duty, the Larry McDuff that was a union of the real Eugene Walsh and the dead Larry McDuff, was something new, and his combined pasts could be put behind them both. This was wishful thinking, rationalization, of course, because the look in my stepdad's eyes, as he told me this story, plainly showed it was a lesson, a moment, seared into him so deeply that no mere change of identity could shake it. Yet, I understood his desire for peace.

I recall him once telling me, I forget where, when, or why, that, 'I never want another man to have to endure a war like what I went through again, but I'm proud to have served as long as I did because there was nobility along with the death, and it was something grand, and for larger things than the petty things men usually argue about, and not simply 'cause the Japs were bad and we were good. They were just like us, and....'

He never completed that thought. Yet, somehow, in the weird way that a mind works, there is something that occurred at a different time, that somehow completes what I felt he must have been thinking. Whether I am right or wrong I do not know. But, there is an image I have, of an evening, not long after Larry married my mother, just a few weeks after her divorce from my daddy became final. It was in between VE and VJ Days, and in a row of apple orchards where Larry and my mother had gone to walk barefoot, on the property they had just bought. From afar, I saw what seemed to be a swarm of butterflies descend upon them. Frightened, thinking that it might not be butterflies but human hungry locusts, I ran towards them, although there was little that a small girl like me could do against a horde of ravenous

insects. I screamed and was sad, as I ran in to my mother's arms. Many of the butterflies took off, and the cloud of fear I held lifted with their ascent. Yet, one butterfly- a yellow and blue one, remained perched delicately on Larry's right cheekbone. He smiled, and said that this butterfly whispered in his ear that his name was also Larry, and that he wanted to be friends. I did not believe what Larry, my stepdad, said, for having seen many butterflies, before and after, I knew they did not speak, yet, I must admit, I had never seen a butterfly quite like this one, though. It was absolutely fearless, and when Larry- the human- gently extended a finger to Larry the butterfly, the smaller Larry obediently hitched a ride. My Larry then put butterfly Larry on the opposite side of his face, and then Larry the Lesser flickered up and about Larry's head and disappeared behind it. I figured that the little show was over. I was wrong. For when big Larry turned around, there was little Larry holding fast to the thick brown hair on the back of my stepdad's head. Again, he held out a finger behind his head, and little Larry got on, as big Larry lowered his hand, and held little Larry out for me to see.

I was enthralled. Years later, with my own children, such a scene could only have been witnessed in a film like *Doctor Dolittle*. But, here was a scene of true interspecific communication unlike any a film could capture. For several minutes this scene played out, and little Larry seemed reluctant to leave Big Larry, and then was when I recognized the reason for the bug's affection, that it had met a kindred soul, a changeling whose life was as unique as its own.

When my husband and I were celebrating our fourth wedding anniversary, years later, I remember telling him of my daddy and stepdad, and some of these things that I have told you, as well as others. We were walking on the farm that my mom and Larry owned, when I was young, but which had been sold in the interim, after he had died of a heart attack, and my mom suffered through some rough financial times. I had asked permission of the then current owners to allow me an afternoon of roaming and remembrance, and hearing that this was an anniversary wish, they graciously assented. As we walked among the rows of small apple trees I had helped my stepdad plant, many things returned to me. As evening came, I found myself speaking less and less, but remembering more and more, of both my daddy and my stepdad, and how I loved them both, but Larry- or Eugene, just a little more.

That was when I noticed that we had stopped in almost the exact same spot where Larry, my stepdad, had met Larry, the butterfly, all those years before. As I stood where the two Larrys once were I questioned who I really was,

with all the force that I had wondered the same thing about my stepdad. All I felt, then and there, were memories, even as my husband drew me close, and wrapped me up in his arms. Reflexively, and with closed eyes, I extended my right hand, then my index finger, and I was my stepdad, maybe more, cavorting with his namesake, which was nothing if not bliss itself, a state Larry knew did not come easily through life's abruptive and dark rhythms. Then, it alighted upon me, soft as gossamer, yet making its place in my memory of all things, as a halo of joy came over us both, rising and circling my life, never stopping- not at that anniversary moment, nor since, rising with, yet apart from, the self that claims too much of the other as its own, authoring something more beautiful than memory alone, until such moments overwhelm, and eyes must open to the real, whose images dance and merge through and with that wonderful feeling that I was part of, yet just in reflection; this the true place of union, where only one remains. I think it is called grace.

## 2

‘Who’s that?’

This was the question that most entered the minds of men whenever Christine Ramirez entered in close proximity to them; at least those men who were not dead, gay, blind, or retarded. She was one of those women that every man instantly wanted, and simply for the blind fortune of how her genetic makeup played out. If you have ever gazed upon a film that had Grace Kelly or Catherine Zeta-Jones in it you will instantly know the sort of woman I speak of. Yes, she wore a bit too much makeup, and her tightly curled black hair held a bit too much hairspray, and some other lesser looking women would often comment snarkily that she looked as if the 1980s had never ended, but it did not matter to Christine. She did not care of the manifest envy her good looks inspired in other women, just as she was somewhat oblivious to the intense lust it caused in men, usually her male co-workers at the bank she worked at.

Yet, there was more to Christine than her supreme good looks, although they were a handful that tended to dominate every moment any other person spent in her presence. Men wanted to be with her, and those women who could get beyond their envy, wanted to be her. She was a quarter Mexican, but also half German and a quarter Italian. This is where she got her great cheekbones and rich olive skin from. Her curly black hair, and rich red lips were just fortuity and good fortune. She never deliberately accentuated her body’s pristine nature, but there was no hiding it, especially in a bank environment, where good and professional clothing is essential. She had rich, full breasts, which hung like large perfect globes off her small chest, not too low nor too high, and they were exquisitely rounded. Her ass was small and tight, and her fishnet stocking legs were always a treat to the guys she worked with. The perfumes that she wore also were causes of instant attraction and reaction.

Despite all this, though, Christine was not happy in her life. Yes, she had a steady beau, a good looking ex-football star in high school, but all he saw in her was her looks. There was another guy, a guy she had recently trained as a teller, and he fascinated her, for reasons she had never been able to discern; perhaps because he was so smart, and knew so much about science, the arts, history, and philosophy. She could more easily see herself with him, in the

long run, than with her current boyfriend, but she was not adept at handling emotional scenes, nor disappointing others. Since she was always the pursued, not the pursuer, how could she make things she felt known to both the guy she had, but didn't want, and the guy she wanted, but didn't have?

This was a talent she did not have, nor had ever been able to practice. When she was thirteen, and first took on the form of a sexually desirable woman, the boys on her block would line up for a kiss from the most beautiful girl on the block, because she could never disappoint them. It was her motto that joy should be brought into the world whenever and wherever it could be. It hurt her to disappoint others, somehow, even if it meant she was the one whose desires were not fulfilled.

A few weeks earlier, on lunch break, she had been upset over an argument she had had with her boyfriend, the night before, over a topic that is of no real consequence, and the guy she really liked had come over, talked to her, really listened, and given good advice, the kind to really help her, and not to somehow subtly undermine her relationship for his own purposes, although, had he done so she would not have held it against him. It would have shown he was a man of passion. As it was, he was a man of integrity, to her.

The way he looked at her made her know he really liked her, too, but as a person, not just a body he'd like to get naked with. This only made her desire for him grow, sexually and personally. But, when she wanted to thank him, tell him that she couldn't stand her boyfriend, and that she was drawn to him, instead, in walked some of the other employees, on their breaks, and the two of them had to return to work. Still, when he wiped away a tear on her cheek, the sense of his warm fingertips on her pale cheek thrilled her, oddly and sexually, and that night she fantasized about making love with her co-worker. She rarely ever touched herself, during her fantasies, but this one was particularly intense, for in it she felt that she now knew she truly loved her co-worker, and eagerly plotted out how she would tell him.

She figured that he was merely intimidated by her looks, as most men were, as well the knowledge that she was 'spoken for', as her parents would say. Or, perhaps, he had self-confidence problems, and thought himself too unattractive to ever dream that a woman as good looking as Christine was could desire him. Or, maybe, he felt that it was not worth passing on his genes unless he could do so with a woman like Christine. If he could have someone like her, he would change his mind. All these thoughts ran through her brain for she had encountered men like that before. Thus, she knew it

would have to be up to her to make the first move, so she resolved to do so, the very next day. But, then, all hell broke loose, as the saying goes.

There was a cash theft at the branch they worked at, and several weeks of investigations and recriminations led to a number of good people being fired, none with any proof of wrongdoing against them, Christine got so disgusted by what was going on, and learning of a *sotto voce* smear campaign against her, by some of the other females in the bank who were just using the rancor as a way to vent their envy at her, that, during an interview, in the manager's office, about the theft, and who she thought was the guilty party, she simply took a deep breath, then blurted out, 'I quit.' She got up, walked back to the time clock, punched out, gathered her things, and was gone. It all happened so quickly and so naturally, that she had little time to even ponder the consequences of her actions. The next day she came back to the bank to clear out her savings account and bring it to another bank. That's when she looked for the man she truly cared for, but he was off that day. She'd have just one more chance to be honest with him, the following Friday, when her last paycheck was due. She came that day, got it, and came directly to his teller window to cash it. She did, and they said goodbye, as he- in the gentlemanly way he always did- grasped her hand, ran his fingers over them, and kissed her hand.

The fat teller girl, next to him, blushed and giggled, and Christine, whose boyfriend was waiting outside the bank for her, and had driven her there, wanted to tell him that she had waited all her life for a guy like him, who could understand the real her, see through the façade of makeup that the world forced upon her. But, that fat girl would not stop giggling, and he looked at her with such real warmth. All she could do was say goodbye, weakly, lower her eyes, and head out the door. A few weeks later, she got the guts to break up with her boyfriend, and had finally decided to tell her former co-worker that she wanted to date him, be with him, and, if things worked out, maybe even love him. But, when she returned, she found out he had been fired the very next day after she had last seen him, and was gone. No tellers knew his address, and she couldn't very well ask the branch manager, whom she had up and quit on, for where her *never to be lover* lived.

This was all over seventeen years ago, and Christine Ramirez is now long married, long divorced, and the mother of three young girls of her own. The oldest is just entering high school now, and has her mother's electric effect on men. She walks over to her mother, when she looks out her apartment

window, sometimes, and wants to ask her what she's thinking of. But, there is something serene and perfect in her mother's uncommented upon dolor, so perfect that if she disturbed her she would crumble into tears, so the eldest daughter of Christine Ramirez says nothing.

It runs in the family.

# A Sample

Mandisa Bexley

Mandisa Bexley had been unemployed for a number of months, but had lived off her savings and the good graces of others for a while. It was nice to be thought fondly of, but she did not want others to feel she was taking advantage of them. This was especially true whereas it concerned her teen son Levondre, who was living with his father for the last few years, as Mandisa struggled with some personal issues. She had given birth to Levondre when she was barely out of college, and never really loved his father, although he was a good man, and one of the few men she knew who actually wanted to be a father to his son. Still, life intervened, and she was reliant upon him to do most of the upbringing of their son these last few years. Mandisa always tried to remain upbeat, and she had hoped losing her last job, due to the same bureaucratic nonsense that goes on in a thousand offices across the country in a day, would be a good thing, in the long run, spur her on to some greater achievement, or the like, but it didn't work out that way. No, it was virtually all for naught, and all because some boss of hers, who was a lonely, ugly bitch, with dried moles on her face, had told her to do something one way, which was against company policy, and when it came back that she had done it the boss's way, thus getting her in trouble, the boss denied ever telling Mandisa that she had instructed her to break a company rule that Mandisa had not even known about. Whether or not the boss had set her up, just because she did not like her because she spoke her mind, was something she was still not sure of, but the end result was all that mattered, and that result was that she was unemployed. She had lived off her savings, and had tried to pursue her dream of becoming a photographer for nearly a year, now, and loved that she was able to make her own schedule, and choose what she wanted to work on. If only others could see what a great eye for composition she had, and what a flair for colors. But, an artistic photographer can rarely make ends meet, and there were too many photojournalists and fashion photographers out there to easily break in. Like all other fields, the people who got the best paying assignments were not the best people, but those with the best connections. But, that's not what she wanted, anyway. She wanted something more.

Now, she had finally been hired, yesterday, to do a telemarketing job,



selling- of all things- college directories and yearbooks to alumni. Before she saw the ad in the local newspaper she had not even realized such a thing existed. Yearbooks? Yes. But who the hell wanted to keep in touch with old classmates? Her high school was a hellhole, a virtual prison, and Mandisa didn't care whether her classmates lived or died, truly. She had spent the last year looking for work here and there, going to a couple of dozen interviews, but with fifty to a hundred applications per job it was a crapshoot. She always found it odd how politicians and pundits were always declaring the economy was great, yet there were no jobs for average folk like her. Check that, she was not average, but found her own self-definition often going that route. As for this telemarketing job, she would start training next week, and recalled sitting in the office, waiting for her interviewer, who was over ten minutes late to speak to her. That sort of casual disdain is never a good sign for a company. Nor was the fact that they crowed of a great salary and benefits, when the starting salary was a mere \$10 an hour, plus a meager commission rate. She knew that their benefits probably blew, for what was 'excellent' these days would have been considered meager thirty years ago. After all, this company had no pension plan, merely a 401k, like so many other shitty little companies. Yet, in the minutes she was waiting, she did not think of these things alone, for Mandisa saw a young black girl who was even more obese than she was, and for nearly twenty minutes this girl was rapt, in total awe, of some little video game she played on her cell phone. As she saw the girl's tongue sidle to the side of her open mouth, almost slavering in the heat of whatever it was the game offered, Mandisa felt that a part of her was dying inside, for she had re-entered the world of zombies who did not know nor care that there was more to the world than their pointless little lives. These were the sorts of folks who worked phone jobs, especially telemarketing jobs, and she could already feel her artistic impulses fraying. Yet, she flew through the interview, answering queries with ease, and bragging of her ability to type over seventy words per minute, even with her long four inch fingernails, which made her hands seem like some sort of arachnid. This morning had to go down to *DOA Drug Testing*, off of Hampton Avenue, not far from where she grew up, to give a urine sample. It was in an industrial part of town, and the last time she had been to that particular business park was about two and a half years earlier, when she took a real estate course at a real estate school in the same plaza. Yet, as she drove by, she saw that the school was closed. The real estate market had slumped, she figured, or else there were too many

people in the business. Especially too many mediocre or bad people, just as there were in photography. The bad always drive out the good, and even the great, through the sheer dint of numbers.

She found it dehumanizing to have to take a drug test. She had never taken drugs in her life and found the whole thing humiliating and degrading. Why did she have to be assumed guilty until proven innocent? Did the company own her body simply because she was willing to give her time for a paycheck? It always galled her that employers felt that they were doing workers a favor by employing them, rather than the obvious fact that work was an exchange between two entities, as in a business-customer relationship. Her father had been a union steward, in a toaster factory, years before, but that had shut down. She loved listening to his tales of union solidarity, and wondered why the labor movement had been such a failure. Not that it was a complete waste, but after its high point in the mid-Twentieth Century, workers rights and ability to just do a job, live decently, and have solid benefits, was slowly eroded. It seemed not only foolish but inhuman, the way most workers were tossed aside. When she was let go from her last job, it was as if the woman who terminated her did not even care that she had a life, things that would be inconvenienced. And it was not as if she had been a poor worker. To the contrary, she had never missed a day, and done excellent work. There were just little things- lies and deceits that she objected to, which, when manifested to her boss, was not liked. It was ok, of course, for management to lie through their teeth, but if an employee told them what they said was untrue, well, that was 'insubordination'. And, God forbid if she refused to take a drug test, well, then she was unemployable. Yet, she knew, from watching news reports, that there were over seventy household items that could cause false positive readings, and with her luck she feared that this would be true in her case. She had done telephone work, customer service, for a local telephone company, a few years before, but had left it after rumblings of impending layoffs. She never really liked phone work, and certainly viewed taking this job as a step backwards in her life. She really wanted to get work as a freelance photographer, and, perhaps, also get a gallery exhibit of her work, some day. But, as in most of life, and surely most of business, quality was the least viable commodity there was. It was who you knew, and 'who you blew', as one of her girlfriends often teased her.

When she went in to the interview, yesterday, she dreaded not getting the job, for this would mean she might be permanently unemployable, but she

also dreaded getting the job, not only because it was a definite regression in her life- even though the job itself seemed easier than her phone company job, but because it meant having to deal with ridiculous rules, and niggling little power play games. When the Human Resources drone told her she had the job, she could feel her year of freedom being squeezed to its essence, as if there had been no break between this and her last job, like she had never even gotten off the gerbil wheel, and she fretted over whether or not she had truly fully enjoyed her time off's benefits. A part of her felt that her life was suddenly over, or, at least, turned off. She knew it really wasn't, but perhaps the creative part was. Creativity is an odd thing. At different times in her life it was as dry as the Sahara. At other times it poured from her like the water over Niagara Falls. She had always vacillated between the two, yet was deathly afraid that the Sahara would win, and the implacable dried sand of nothingness would win out. She would now spend her free days gathering up and mailing off portfolios of her best work, in a desperate plea, almost, for recognition. Thus, she only viewed this new job as a stopgap job, to pay the bills. She had to view it that way, or go insane knowing her life was a waste. She had to make things, she had to find connections between them, in those few moments a photograph can be great or routine. Without that in her life, nothing meant a thing. Not her son, not her own existence. She was a vessel for something greater, she felt. Fear, such as this, was a good thing, though, especially when it could be harnessed, and Mandisa knew this was what she needed to do. She also knew that, in about a month, there was a shopping mall being built in her town, and that it would include a supermarket. When she was going to college, she had worked as a front end cashier manager, at nights, and enjoyed dealing with real live people, rather than mere disembodied voices on the ends of a telephone call. It would take about six months to complete the new store, but Mandisa felt that she would have a good job at snaring a similar position at this new store, which was closer, and offered more creative potentials, and then she could quit her phone job, and never look back. Perhaps, by then, some interest in showing her photographs would materialize.

Not that she dreamt of a long career in grocery, either, but it would be a little bit less depressing than answering phones ad infinitum. That her photographs, which every person who saw them raved over, were not getting her the recognition she deserved really ate at Mandisa, just as the fact that she was always called 'the fat girl with the pretty face'. Why is it that fat girls are

always told that if only they would lose weight they would be so beautiful? Most skinny women were not exactly bathing beauties. She had had a weight problem since childhood, and the boys on her block would always call her 'Man Diesel' or just 'The Diesel'. Yet, obesity ran in her family, even going back to her great-great grandfather, an ex-slave, who somehow was rotund despite what little slaves were fed. Yet, she was not one of those proverbial 'fat slob'. In fact, Mandisa was what might be called anal about certain things. Part of this may have been the fact that she was a devout Christian, and felt her body was a temple. Yet, her beliefs also led to her loneliness. She often turned down the advances of men who simply wanted sex because she thought they were perverts, especially the 'chubby chasers' who felt all fat women were so desperate for sex and affection that they should be grateful any man wanted to look at them, much less have sex with them. Thus, her father's son, while certainly not a good match for her, was a damned sight better a man than most of the losers she encountered.

Mandisa was someone who loved organization, and thrived on knowing just where things were. She also made a habit of being punctual. She had little tolerance for people who were always late. It was rude, she thought, and reflected poorly on their character. Arriving early in the morning, to the drug testing place, was a must for her, because she knew she could not hold in her urine too long after a night's sleep. Yet, she had, during previous drug tests, always had a problem urinating right away. This was one of the things she found debasing- having to stand around, and wait to be milked for urine, as if a cow. It reduced her and the others who took such tests to mere lab animals, with all the human element of themselves gone. That it was for a mind numbing and soul deadening job only made her more dispirited. Of course, she was always shy about such things. She had been raised, as so many people were, to somehow be embarrassed by her bodily functions, as if they were base and vile, rather than the natural and healthy things they were. She even recalled an old boyfriend of hers telling her that he could never urinate in public restrooms if another guy was in the room. Of course, he also had other obsessions, such as the toilet mat in his bathroom. If it was not perfectly straight, and parallel to the toilet he would go crazy, even to the point of whipping out his yardstick and taking measurements to determine if the mat was perfectly aligned. Was it embarrassment or shame that drove him to such oddities? The real reasons he never descried. Damn, she hadn't thought of him in years. Where was old Chester now? Last she had heard he moved to

New Jersey, and worked for a beer distributor. Yet, she knew what he felt. She tried to resist the urge to go to the bathroom this morning, even though she felt her bladder was not full. She even drank a glass of chocolate milk before she left her apartment, and also a couple of small glasses of milk when she stopped at her mother's apartment. She also had a small sip of water, and figured that would be enough to release a gusher by the time she got to the drug testing place.

Still, the idea of it all nagged at her, as she had never done drugs in her life, and she felt that the company had no real right to ask her to debase herself. Yet, what could be done? Unless the mass of American workers rose up all as one, such small indignities would persist in the workplace. And she knew that most human beings were lazy and blind followers of whatever came along, so did not hold up much hope for such enlightenment. Many years earlier, in one of her first jobs after high school, Mandisa had worked one summer at a bank, as a teller, and there was a theft of money from another of the teller's drawers, a few weeks after she had started. The next day, a few weeks worth of hell broke loose, as tellers were questioned, some let go, and even some of the supervisors were transferred, demoted, or let go. The management wanted all the tellers to take polygraph tests, but Mandisa refused, for she had an uncle who had worked for one of those companies and he told her that if the test came back positive, which often happened with nervous folk, such as she was, that they would be blacklisted for life, for polygraph companies made no real money from the administration of the tests, but from the reselling of the information, which while illegal and unethical, was manifestly highly profitable. So, Mandisa refused, and furthermore advised other tellers not to take the tests, for the same reasons she refused to. They all caved in, however, and took the tests, and some tellers were fired for failing the test. Mandisa was fired, as well, although for not taking the test. However, the bank created a faux reason for her 'dismissal'. A supervisor whom she had had words with, when the woman insulted Mandisa's racial and cultural heritage, claimed that she had heard Mandisa cursing at a customer. This was absolutely false, and the branch manager would not tell her which customer was cursed at, nor what was said, for she knew that there would be no customer willing to lie, and there had been no 'incident' to speak of. Almost a year later, she found out that the supervisor, who had lied about her cursing at a customer, had been fired, herself, a few months later, after it was found out that she was, indeed, the thief. Of course, the bank never called Mandisa,

nor any of the other wronged employees, and offered them their jobs back. They did not even offer an apology. She never forgot that indignity, nor any of the others that subsequent jobs and companies tossed at her. Nor did she forget her silent acceptance of most of them.

Nor would she ever forget this indignity, not only for having to give a sample, but for what went into the rest of it. The drug testing place opened at 8 am, and Mandisa arrived there at about 8:15. She signed in and told the man who was there- a middle aged white man named Doug, who seemed a bit odd; the kind with that odd glint in his eyes- that she often had trouble urinating on command, so it might take her ten or fifteen minutes in the room. Doug then said, 'Oh no, you only get two minutes inside to go, so wait outside until you can go, then tell me, and I'll let you in.'

Mandisa shook her head yes, and now felt more pressure than ever. Here she was, with a job, and even her life, dependent upon her ability to piss on command in the presence of a humorless man who seemed quite ghoulish. She asked him if she might be able to walk around for a bit, for that helps her to go. He told her yes, but that she had to give a sample within three hours of arriving, and that more than two little styrofoam cups of water would dilute the test results. Now, the pressure was really on Mandisa, for she had to urinate by 11:15 am, or not get this job, which she felt she was going to loathe anyway. And this man that seemed to look at her askance gave her the willies. She knew his name was Doug, but he reminded her of some sort of character from a bad *Seinfeld* tv episode. The Piss Nazi was what she called him, in her head. What really galled her was having to tell this total stranger what medicines she was on. She had to reveal that she was taken estrogen, occasionally, because she had had a slight hormonal imbalance that came and went after last year having had to undergo a lumpectomy. Why this was Doug's, the company's, or anyone's business, angered her even more. So did this two minute time limit nonsense. And because she was raised to be embarrassed by her bodily functions, this meant she had to be ready to explode with urine, or else she would not be able to go at all. Another factor was that, on foreign toilets, she often felt unclean, and because of her weight, she had to feel her flesh spill over the sides of this unclean thing, even if it came with a paper cover, which only made it harder to urinate, and even get the cup underneath, to grab what she needed. As she headed toward the drug testing clinic's door, she recalled that scene in *The Godfather, Part III*, where Al Pacino, as Michael Corleone, thinks that he's finally gotten out of the

Mafia, only to be pulled back in. This submission to this degradation was life pulling her back into corporate irrelevance, when she really wanted to connect with the world, and display her art.

As she walked out into the parking lot, she tried to figure out a way to best urinate. She knew that her body would have to be pushed to its limits. That's when she saw a small convenience grocery store nearby, and walked toward it. She huffed and puffed, and resented that her body was in such bad shape, but knew that there was little she could do about it. Yet, she felt that since drinking water would not work, in terms of helping her with the drug test, for a diluted test was worthless, she might get some milk, chug it, and bloat her bladder until she just had to let it out. Once at the store, she looked about, then bought a half gallon of 2% milk, and drank it all, inside a minute, then walked back to the drug testing place. But when Doug asked her if she was ready to go, Mandisa still could not piss. A few other people had come into the clinic, in the meanwhile, and one middle aged black woman was there with her son, for a pre-trial screening of some sort. It had been about an hour since Mandisa first arrived, and she and the woman laughed over her faulty bladder, and Mandisa thought to herself that this was the type of human connection she could never get from a phone job, but which could at least sustain her at a supermarket, until she was able to get her photography career in full swing. The only problem was that the phone job paid more, while starting out as a checker at a supermarket meant less pay per hour, and only part-time hours. Then, the woman showed her family photos, as her son went in back with Doug to piss. Mandisa saw the woman swell with pride over her progeny, detailing all their quirks and flaws, as well as noting each accomplishment, as if it was the woman, herself, who had done these positive things. When Doug closed the door, separating the front waiting room from the back office and urination area, he got a phone call. After a minute of buzzing silence, it sounded like he had gotten a call from a family member, or someone he was close to, but angry at, for he was very agitated, and started screaming at the person on the other end, as if he'd forgotten that there were clients in the office and he had to act even the slightest bit professional.

He screamed, 'What the fuck do you think I am, made of money? I swear, this is just like you. You never get enough. No matter what I do you're never pleased. All you do is pick, pick, pick. I give and give and all you ever do is take and take, then want still more. Yeah. Well, think about how I feel for a

change. The world doesn't revolve around you. Yeah. And it doesn't revolve around only your needs and your desires. I have feelings, too. What do you think I am, just an ATM machine? I took you there last night. Yeah. Yes. I did. See, where do you get off bringing up that bullshit? Who do you....well, yeah. Who do you think....what? Well, fuck you, too. I don't need this bullshit. Yeah, well, up yours, too. You goddamned asshole. Who do you think you're talking to? After all we've been through. I swear, you are the least caring and appreciative person I've ever known. After all I've....Who was there for you last fall, when....damned right. Me, it's always me. Whenever you've needed something. And who was there....don't give me that. Don't give me that bullshit. Oh yeah? Well, drop dead. Yeah, you and your mother. Don't speak to me like that. No, no, no....no. You're the asshole, you're the liar....'

And on the conversation went like that for a few minutes, until the woman's son was done, Doug took his sample, and went back to the phone. As the woman and her son left, they waved to Mandisa, who then felt she needed to go get something else to drink before the emotionally unstable Doug came back and gave her the evil eye. She called up her girlfriend Missy, who advised her to go get and drink some *Coca-Cola*, because caffeine was a uretic, and would help her go more quickly. So, as Doug continued to rant at his wife, or lover, or child, oblivious to her and anyone else in the cosmos, if not just the office he worked in, she left the office and headed back to the convenience store, pounding her feet into the ground, as if to help force tiny bits of piss into her bladder, like the steady drip of a coffee machine.

Even though less than an hour had passed, there was another man at the store's register, although both were Arabs. This time she bought a one liter bottle of *Coke Classic*, and downed it as soon as she got out of the store. By the time she would get back to the clinic, she knew she would feel a tingling in her bladder. She felt that she could probably go within the two minute time frame. It was now a little after 10 am, and she felt a bit more confident she could be ready to go within the hour. When she got back to the drug testing office, however, she was sweating profusely, and now seven other people had come and gone before her, even though she was the first to sign in that morning. Doug was busy helping some other people with forms, and the other clients were looking somber, as if trying to force themselves to piss, as well. Yet, knowing she would only have two minutes to do her stuff, and being told that if she flushed the toilet the test would be invalid, she felt more



pressure than ever. This sense of being watched and judged, more than anything else, was at the root of her self-conscious inability to urinate. After all, how could one go so quickly if one knew there were people waiting to take her place in the one small bathroom? As Doug was busy with the newer applicants, Mandisa decided to take a third trip to the convenience store, to fill her bladder to its top, and be certain she would go the next time. While walking to the store, she called Missy, again, who now advised her to buy a *Coke Zero* this time, for not only had it caffeine, but it was also made with *Splenda*, and that was yet another uretic. Arriving back at the store, that is exactly what she did. She bought a 20 ounce *Coke Zero* and chugged it the moment she got outside. There was a third Arab counterman, this time, and Mandisa wondered if she had to make a fourth trip to the store, would a fourth Arab be manning the cash register?

She made sure to take a leisurely stroll back to the drug testing place, so that the bladder would not be able to resist the sheer force of its overfill due to embarrassment. With each step she could feel more and more urine well inside of her. Getting back to the drug testing office, she now felt ready to gush. She was certain of it. There was now only one lady ahead of her, and an empty office. It was now or never. She told Doug she was finally ready to go, and he snippily said for her to wait. It was as if he held a personal grudge against her for taking so long to have to urinate. She wanted to tell him to go fuck himself, but figured that mouthing off to a man who could control whether or not you could get a job was just not a smart thing to do. A few minutes passed, and Mandisa was certain she would be able to go the minute she pulled down her pants, and stuck the bottle beneath her. When the other lady was finally done, Doug again repeated that she had only two minutes to go and that to flush the toilet was to invalidate the test. But, Mandisa was ready. It was 10:45 am, and she had been there two and a half hours, with only a half hour left to do her stuff. She rushed into the room, pulled down her pants, and held the cup beneath her. She filled it well past the fill line, then released the rest into the toilet she dared not flush, despite her upbringing.

‘Ah,’ she thought, ‘liquid gold.’

When done, she gave the warm yellow sample to Doug, who did what he did, ordered her to wash her hands in an adjacent room, and when she was done, Mandisa sighed in relief, and asked if any other folks had ever had such trouble going to the bathroom. Expecting that the query might lighten the

dour man's mood, for she felt the whole thing was somewhat of a humorous episode, she was a bit surprised when he rather rigidly snapped at her, 'No,' tore off a carbon sheet, gave it to her, and told her to exit out the front door, as he pointed the way. She saw he was a totally humorless individual, who seemed to really resent the fact that she had somehow taken time from his day. She then knew that he was a Piss Nazi, now, forever, and always, and would be until the end of his miserable existence. Somehow, knowing that there were people with greater problems than hers, made her feel a bit better about herself. Yet, she was relieved to know that, barring his screwing up her test results, she would never have to see his sour form again. Having never taken an illegal drug in her life, she figured the odds were at least in her favor on that meager score.

But, even so, this all still meant that she had regressed in life. Her photographs were still not being appreciated by others, and passing this lousy drug test only meant that she could get a meager, and likely shitty, job with a lousy company, doing lousy work that had not a scintilla of real meaning in the cosmos. There was no getting around the uncomfortable fact that losing a job haunts one, despite one's best intentions to ignore those feelings, and even knowing that a job is to provide money to pay the bills. It's ultimately meaningless, but in the short term vital. Damn that truth! Selling directories and yearbooks, after all, did not even rank with being a doctor or a fireman, much less an artist of stature. Hell, even her jobs at the phone company and, especially, the supermarket were more important. There, working for the telephone company, at least, she could convince herself that she was helping to keep people in touch, especially for emergencies and the like. And, the job at the grocery store could be seen as helping to keep people fed and healthy. But selling yearbooks? Who ever grew up dreaming of being a telemarketer?

As she got in her car and drove away from the drug testing place where Doug the Piss Nazi worked, Mandisa Bexley waited to pull out of the parking lot and onto the main road. She thought that if she had less self-esteem she might, at a time like this, contemplate suicide, or the like. She had thought of it in earlier years, when depressed over things like her weight and appearance, but she was never the sort for such melodramatics. Also, as she was a practicing Christian, she knew that suicide was considered a sin, and she wanted to avoid eternal damnation if she could. As she waited to pull out of the parking lot, she stifled tears that she knew not the provenance of. She just knew that it was in her nature to never forget a kindness, and, likewise, to

never forget an indignity, that was shown her. It's just that she was not the sort of person to dwell on the latter. Yet, she took comfort in knowing that, just as her year of freedom could be squeezed to nothingness, so could however long this meager job lasted, and when it was over, in her next career interregnum, she could look back on it as a simple blur, a small sample of the aggravation all creative types must endure, that meant little in a life of real accomplishment, the one her photographs descried. Yes, she would squeeze all of it- calls, minutes, days, weeks, months, years, whatever it took- into a moment, something a mere blink could moisten, then tear away. When all the oncoming traffic passed her, Mandisa quickly pulled out into the far left lane of the rest of her life, without so much as a glance in her rearview mirror.

# The Hill That Wasn't

Twenty-four years as a pharmacist were not enough to prepare Tim Wagner for fatherhood. Yet, as he thought about it, what could have? Yes, he felt some primeval urges, and thought that he might have some instinctual knowledge that would come to the fore whenever he needed it most, but that was something that would have to find itself. If he worried about being a good father, he knew that he would overdo things, and end up like some bad parody of fatherhood from some lame tv sitcom, or those Hollywood films from a few decades ago, where dads were clueless in perpetuity, right from birth. They would panic the moment that the woman went into labor, and not even know how to boil water. Fortunately, he had no problems with that sort of stuff. His ideas on fatherhood reflected the deeper problems, on how to provide a good role model, on how to properly counsel his child, without letting his own life's experiences bias him too greatly into giving information that might create greater problems that were not inherently there for his child, simply to avoid life's lesser problems.

As he pushed his baby girl in her pram, he tried to reflect on his own life. It was a daunting time for him, and not simply because there was one major change in his life, the birth of his daughter. There were other things going on, as well. He had just taken a job that was a major change in his career, as a used car salesman. Tim knew nothing about the profession, but was willing to learn. He was the ever eager sort of man, ready to dive into whatever life presented him. He had plenty of experience listening to people. As a pharmacist, however, the conversations tended to be a bit deeper, and more somber, than those at a car dealership. Perhaps this was what annoyed him the most of being a pharmacist- call it 'the stench of death' that hid behind even the sunniest seeming of conversations. But, he had the basic skills, he knew, and he was eager to see how well he could transfer them over to a new task. He had simply grown tired of working for others. He thought about opening up his own store, but there were just too many drug store chains to compete with- *CVS*, *Walgreens*, and a half dozen others, not to mention every major grocery chain and convenience store now had drug departments, including the odious BiG Box stores like *Wal-Mart* and *K-Mart*. It was as if the nation was overdosing on medicines just because new ones were always coming out. Tim felt that drugs should only be taken when definitely ill, not

merely if one was sad, nor had a minor irritation. He also loathed corporations. He felt they were Un-American, and loved what Ambrose Bierce had said of them, something to the effect that corporations were merely things created by the rich to maximize profits and minimize personal responsibility. They stifled competition, made little businesses almost impossible to start, and thus squashed true innovation, which only comes with competition. They also, he felt, were among the chief purveyors of this 'take a pill and feel better' attitude that he felt was narcotizing a whole generation of younger people. He felt almost guilty when he filled a prescription for whatever the latest 'drug of the month' was for some kid who was a little too fat or dim witted. This 'guilt', if you will, was irrational, to a degree, for his paycheck depended upon being objective, and not interjecting his unsolicited opinions, but nonetheless it had an effect on his choice to try something new.

Tim also just could not understand why politicians who always said they were in favor of small businesses never did a damned thing to help small businesses. After all, corporations were merely legal fictions. They could not exist without the state's sanction of them, yet states did little to rein in their abuses- of workers, consumers, and basic fair play. His brother-in-law had offered him the job at his dealership after so many years of listening to Tim bitch about how tired he was of being a pharmacist. He told him, 'If you're so unhappy, do something about it. Too many people nowadays just sit and complain. Take a chance, Tim. You might fail, but at least then you'd know you tried, and wouldn't have any regrets.' Tim finally got so fed up with being a pharmacist, after he was accused of having a 'hidden agenda' when he refused to fill a prescription from a woman that was obviously not a real one signed by a doctor. It was a small thing, but those are always the sorts of things that act as spurs for a person to truly change their life. However, Tim knew most life changes were not usually for the better. Even if they were not for the worse they only entailed a lateral move to a different sort of frustration, if not misery. In the back of his mind he wondered how long it would be before he and his brother-in-law had a falling out over the most inconsequential of matters and he was given his walking papers. Still, Tim tried to remain positive, even as he dreaded his change in career, the very one that he initiated.

One of the positive things was that the money he could make would be good, and he figured if he was even pretty good at selling cars, he could make

almost as much in auto sales as he did in the drug store game. And if things didn't work out he could always fall back on a pharmacy job. That was his plan. He would give the new career a go, for six months, maybe a year, and if he didn't like it, he would start applying around at one of the big drug store chains, or maybe even a supermarket drug store department. He thought that working for a place whose primary goal was not pushing drugs might be better than working for CVS or the like. There would be less pressure, and he thought he could be a shoe-in to run a department. But, he was going to try the car business, for a while, at least. Thus, he left the only career he had ever really known just three months, one week, and four days shy of his 25<sup>th</sup> Anniversary with the pharmacy he had considered home. His pension was secured, but retirement was still some years off.

As he strolled around with little Tina, Tim thought of his past life, and his five other children, with his first wife. He had worked so long and so late, shoveling drugs to customers, that he barely had any memory of his first family's youth. This was what undid his marriage, not something dramatic like his wife cheating, or his having developed some drug habit by stealing from the store. No, it simply ended. And when he met the woman who would be his second, and final, wife, he resolved that he would do things differently. As a salesman he would choose his own schedule, and work when he wanted. As he had loaned his brother-in-law start up cash to start his business, last year, he owned a piece of the dealership, and would have the luxury of being a part-owner, as well. He loved his new wife, and when she told him she was pregnant with a girl, he was flabbergasted. They had taken precautions, and neither really wanted a child, but, when the idea realized itself within his wife's mind, she figured that she would give motherhood a try. That she was not totally enthused with the prospect of motherhood surprised some of her friends, who felt that all women wanted to give birth, but that was her real reaction, and she found it odd that women, especially, could not understand that she did not see herself as merely a baby machine. Granted, this now seemed like a contradictory opinion, given her pregnancy, but it was also true.

To Tim, the thought of being a father, again, as the big Five Oh approached was not comforting, but when his wife decided she wanted to have the baby, he relented, and that was when the impetus to change his life, including his career, really took off. Now nearly six months old, Tina was Tim's joy in life. Yes, he loved his boys from his first marriage, but they were adults, and he

was not nearly as close to them as he would have liked to have been. Thus, Tina reaped the benefit of all her father's past failures, and his natural desire to atone for them. Tim had few memories of his first tries at fatherhood. There was that time his family took a vacation to New York City, and one of his sons, although which he could not- to his shame- recall, had been fascinated by the construction of a skyscraper in Manhattan. The clan had trekked in from their hotel near LaGuardia Airport, and had seen the Statue Of Liberty, the Empire State Building, and many of the other sites, museums, and art galleries. Tim had tried to make up for his lack of time with the kids by making his little time with them all quality time, seeing places that could expand their souls and minds. Of course, the children just wanted to be with their dad, yet Tim was compelled to forcefeed them culture. His own favorite sight to see had been Radio City Music Hall, yet here was his youngest son, drawn to looking up to the sky at the massive construct of steel and glass that was being assembled like some giant *Tinker Toy* or *Erector Set*, like those he had bought his sons.

Instinctively, Tim hoisted the boy upon his shoulders, to look over the wooden fence, while he peered through a knot in the wood. There, the two males were closer than they had ever been, as they watched bulldozers plow through the earth, and giant cranes lift metallic things that weighed tons. Boys are always drawn to large things, and with his son atop him, Tim recalled his fascination with telescopes, years earlier, and how he had spent a summer night on a hill with his Uncle Ruben, who had bought him a telescope for his birthday. There, his father's brother explained to him about the formation of galaxies, how some stars were a million times larger than the sun, which was a million times larger than the earth. Such concepts overwhelmed Tim, yet fascinated him, as well, and when his son asked for a boost higher, as if to somehow gauge his own size potential against the naked skyscraper, Tim did so, knowing that he too would have too feel as insignificant as Tim had felt in the face of the cosmos to understand just what and what he could not do of significance in this life. For Tim it was the universe, for his son it was the big buildings of the greatest city on earth, for other boys it was the look of awe when confronting the size of a *Tyrannosaurus Rex* skull. Size dwarfs the human mind and ego, yet also places one into the natural continuum of things, as well as inspiring such minds.

When he let his son down, after a few minutes, as the aches and stiffness of

the lift got to him, he felt closer to being a true father than he ever had before, and that was a feeling that he hoped to regain, but rarely did. The rest of their trip to New York was spent watching a Charlie Brown movie at Radio City, and a bad airplane flight home. The laughter of his boys on that trip was overwhelming, and so was his joy. But, that was another time, and he was not that person any longer, if he had ever truly been. As he gazed down at his baby daughter, who was more than just a ten pound lump of flesh to him, in the back of his mind, Tim also had another reason for wanting to be a good father to his daughter, and that was the lingering sense that he was not really wanted nor appreciated as a child, for he had been put up for adoption, himself, when he was born, as he had had several physical problems, at birth, which had him languish in foster homes for the first three years of his life. He recalled none of those times, though, but the earliest memory of his life was still with him. Of course, whether it was a genuine memory, or one of those the brain cobbles together to fill a hole or desire he was not sure of. It may have been even one of those memories that was simply a false one that had been grafted together from the tales that his parents had told him about himself, and he just sublimated into his own memory. It was the day he was first brought home from the adoption agency by his adoptive parents, the Wagners. They were a middle class couple in their late forties, but were granted him because there were simply no other couples willing to take on the expense and burden of a sickly boy. If he was a stray, they were bereft, and they fit each other perfectly.

They were good people, but in his memory, so early and specific, all of what he would grow to love and revere about them was yet to be lived. In his mind, he is just a little boy, and the world is bigger than he can now possibly imagine. Even his later look at the night sky with his uncle would not totally recapture the sense of grandeur that such a moment like this instilled within his psyche. There are moments of primacy and primality. This had elements of both. Adults forget how easily a shift in perspective, from a height of five and a half or six feet, back down to a foot or two, can radically alter one's perceptions of the world. But things shrink or expand, depending on which direction and vantage point you look, by an order of two or three times, and the smaller you are, the larger even a number like two or three is. There he was, wrapped up in warm clothes, as it was a chilly spring day. Some woman, perhaps his long forgotten foster mother or a woman who worked for the adoption agency that was in charge of him, is handing him over to the



woman who would become his mother, Mrs. Wagner, as the man who would become his dad, Mr. Wagner, looked on, smiled, and made those typical baby faces and noises that grown ups do in the presence of tots. If there was a hint of emotion in the forgotten woman's face, Tim has long since banished it from recall. She was just an employee of the state. He was nothing to her. He knew this, intellectually, but then, she was there, and being there is all important to a being that suffers from such a form of helplessness. He looks up at this wraith, and wonders if she is now dead, like his parents. What were her dreams and aspirations? Did she really want to be a foster parent, or did it simply 'happen'? In his dreaminess, Tim looks at the flickering and distorted woman, and feels nothing, and is only sad at the emptiness, not the woman. The Wagners, of course, he will soon know everything of. Their history and background will become his, but this foster mother, she is doomed to fade. He wonders if, ten years ago, her outline would have been crisper, or her voice more than a generic blur that he has to conjure from some hidden aspect of his hopes. She is like a star that was and then explodes, except that she has not even left a nebula of her passing as a reminder.

Tim smiles, for Timothy Wagner is his name. Timothy was the name his birth mother gave him, although he would not learn this fact till many years later, as well as her name. The Wagners like it, and since he answers to it, they decide to leave well enough alone. It is a philosophy that they both believe in, and which will later determine why Tim will allay his own regrets as a father, for he will see no point in beating himself up over such things. He only gains two names that day, the middle name Arthur, and the surname Wagner. Timothy Arthur Wagner is born in a most peaceful way, by decree of law, and not by passage through human flesh that distorts all in the moment of emergence into the world. The boy that did come to the world in that way is now forever altered, although perhaps not wholly gone. What bits of him will remain, in the coming years, and how shards of him will affect the newer boy, are part of the great yet small dramas that life always creates in its wake. Now, Tim runs down the corridors of the adoption agency, out toward the brightness of the city that will be his home. One hand is held by that new thing, a mommy, and the other by that other new thing, a daddy. If he lifts his feet off the ground and swings it is by their strength that the earth does not know his stride. He likes this. Tim likes to skip and sing, and the noises he makes are joyous. He remembers things this way. He must. And if it is not completely the way it was, so be it. It *should* have been this way.

Outside, in the noisy street, there is a tree. Tim knows what a tree is. There are trees near his foster home. It is a small observation, one that might root into a different child, but one which, within three weeks, will shrivel to irrelevance. By the end of his fourth month with the Wagners, Tim will have forgotten about all his old toys in the foster home. His new toys matter most, and this is his life. If it ever was different he cannot tell. Now, he is walking up a steep hill, to a car. He has a home. He is *going home*. It is his home. He has never heard of *home*, till now. He always just was some place, but now he will know home. The hill tires him as he walks. Tim Wagner smiles as he recalls all this, and the fact that, over twenty years later, he would return to the adoption agency, his dad long dead from cancer, and his mother helping him in his search. The women at the agency, however, refusing to help. It is not as if they do not sympathize, but their hands are legally tied. Still, Tim has gotten enough, and his search will be successful in a few years. But, that is another story, and not relevant to the more cogent detail that, as he walks out of the building he is in the same spot on that lucky day he became a Wagner.

Yet, the hill is gone. The air as he leaves the building is oddly reminiscent. Was it the same scent of those pink and white flowers on the corner that caught his attention all those years ago? No, they had not caught his attention. They had somehow been there, and he had not noticed it all along. But it crannied its way into his memory and assumed a larger space than they had when he had actually been a little boy. Now, they were beckoning him backward. In the smallest of things lay the greatest of surprises, and Tim Wagner smiled over such a knowledge. But, the hill, itself, was gone. Did some construction take place, and was the street smoothed over. It did not look that way. These buildings were all nearly a century old, and even the streets were not disturbed. It had been so long since construction had taken place that some of the original asphalt had worn away and Tim could see some of the red cobblestone breaking through to the sun. But had the hill disappeared? Yes, it was gone. Or was it. As he trods up the street to where he parked his car, Tim notices that there is a slight elevation caused by the roots of the tree trying to force itself out of the treebox. They look like an octopus trying to grab some poor unsuspecting thing that passes by. And the street has a very slight incline. Slowly, the past gives way to the present, even though that is still another present's past, and Tim begins to see things in a clearer way. As he stands there he realizes that these two elements somehow

welded together in his mind to form the great hill in his past. The upwelling tree roots and the slight incline of the overall street, which are barely noticeable to an adult, were to a little boy, thrilled with the newness of a world in which he became someone's son, a hill that wasn't. He stops and giggles over how the mind changes things, especially reality.

How many other things in his life, that had some significance, if only in a symbolic way, were not? If the mind can so radically distort things, how much of life can ever be viewed as real? Is a table ever solid, merely because one touches it? If one, say, in a state of depression, wills the world away, is the thing they are holding, or touching, at that time, also able to be dematerialized? How much power does the human mind have? Science proves that things as telekinesis are not feasible, at least not in humans as currently evolved, but is a change in perspective, into the past, not as powerful as bending a spoon in the present? If Tim Wagner could first create, then destroy a hill, all in the matter of a few seconds, spread apart by decades, then how much of what is accepted as the truth, by others, is really true?

Shock sets in. Tim looks down, shattered by what races through his mind, then breathes easily when he sees his daughter, Tina, asleep in her pram. Her mind is not weighted down with such thoughts, and for this Tim is relieved. He tries to recall what a baby dreams of. In what cranny of his gray matter are his own baby dreams stored? Or, are older memories simply pushed out, irrecoverable, when new memories are written? Or, if not discarded, are the older memories relentlessly and remorselessly crushed down into nothingness, utter nonexistence? They cannot be, he thinks, lest the hill would never have lasted to his latter recognition, back when he left the adoption agency for that second time. There must be something deeper, more fundamental than memory in the cosmos, and this has to be what reality is.

Tina gurgles up at him. She has always been a child with little that disturbs her. Tim smiles and wonders where she has gotten that trait, for her mother is a worrywart of the worst kind, and he has never been one to let go of life too easily, either. He always felt that the cosmos was some sort of knowable thing, and when it presented mysteries to him, Tim always felt that it was his ignorance, not the universe's mystery, that defined his confused feelings, feelings which seemed to always be present. The look through a telescope was, thus, never his desire to denude nature, but to broaden his knowledge of how truly ignorant he was of its majesty. Yet, it had to be compactable,

accessible to the human mind, for it was as fundamentally a natural thing as anything else in creation. With this in mind, he felt that its answers lay not only in the slow wheel of galaxies, whose vastness was nearly beyond mortal comprehension, but in the smallest of acts, the most mundane of things- be it the illusion of a hill, the selling of a pharmaceutical, or even the lilt of a small child's head, Tina's, which seems puzzled by the far off looks upon her father's face, ones that she will carry with her into the future, like the very lure of largeness that her father can never elude.

# Believe In The Book

Tom Selleck could never quite buy into all the silly sloganeering that the company he worked for engaged in. It was always the same, though, no matter what company, no matter what field, no matter what product his company made. There was always an abundance of those sales types- the kind of gray little men in suits, with phony smiles and slicked back hair. He had seen these men at the beginning of his work career, half a century ago, and the only change was now that some of the men were women, with hair pulled back into buns so tightly that one would think the pull would force a shit out of them. Yet, the plastic smiles remained, like a permanent brand that the person smiling was a bitch, bought and paid for, and the crap that came from their mouth was the litter such bitches bore.

The company he now worked for was called Burris Direct- a family owned company with a few hundred employees, and they printed and sold alumni books to schools, universities, membership organizations, the military, and things like that. There was not much more to the company than that. Yes, there were the requisite tightasses, there were the occasional flirty female managers who wore skirts hiked up just high enough to catch heterosexual male interest, but not high enough so that if said males commented on the leg below the skirt they could legitimately claim they were being sexually enticed. The company was a run of the mill type. There were no great innovators there, and there were a thousand easy and little ways in which things could have been improved, if time and a small sum of money were spent more wisely, but since the company was profitable as it was, even so poorly run, there was no legitimate reason to ever seek to change things. This was manifest from the very first day he walked into the company's training class. He recalled, while in the four weeks of training he received, how the big, gay native Texan who ran the training classes, would sloganeer to his heart's content. His favorite phrase was 'Believe in the book!', as if believing in the super duper qualities of what was essentially a glorified telephone directory, or a school yearbook on steroids, was somehow going to help you convince poor senior citizens to drop nearly a C-Note for it, especially since few of them had credit cards, and even less were ever willing to use them. The management was also lazy as sin. Instead of listing one's weekly stats, the task was pawned off onto each employee, to list their own stats. The

supposed idea was self-empowerment, but all it meant was a waste of time where each employee had to set their own goal for improvement- a specious thing since week to week there would be natural fluctuations.

If the fact that he found it difficult, at his age- seventy-three, to believe such sloganeering tripe was not enough, there was the issue of his name. It was the same as a 1980s television star and sex symbol to women. For all the years before that damnable show, *Magnum P.I.*, came on, no one had thought a thing- for better or worse, about his name. Then, that show became a hit, and his life was somehow pushed into the rear seat of others' considerations. He was never just Tom, any longer, but Tom- that guy with the same name as that guy on tv. It was not the worst burden someone ever had to bear, but it was a burden, and an unnecessary one, at that. For the last quarter century he had endured questions and comments over it, and now, every day he was on the phone, and had to use his name when introducing himself to a customer, he would be asked about it. The worst part was that no one seemed to veer from the question- not lawyers nor doctors, nor even lowly car mechanics. Some might make a joke about it, and say that at least he wasn't named Adolf Hitler- or something like that, but that was as far as any empathy for his plight went.

Being someone with many years in selling various products, however, he tried to turn this to his advantage, as an 'in' to selling the book. He might humorously gibe, at the end of his sales pitch, that Tom Selleck would never lie to them. This worked fairly well, actually, for many older men who lived in rural areas, but Tom did not figure out why until he heard that the actor named Selleck had been a supporter of the NRA, and had been disrespected by the obese and obnoxious talk show host Rosie O'Donnell for his views. Whatever it was, though, if it increased his sales rate, so be it. He had been with Burris a few years, and was a decent salesman, even though he had never done phone sales before this job. The very reason he had to take this job was because he had poorly invested his money on other jobs. Real estate and stock market deals went south, so his dream of living out his golden years in the small Texas town of Marble Falls came to an end. There were no times when Tom ever considered doing himself in. He was not that sort of person, nor was he a quitter, nor self-pityer. Yet, all the dreams that he had once had were gone. There would be no relaxation, no trips to Europe nor Japan. Tom had always wanted to see Mount Fuji, for, as a boy, he was entranced by that series of paintings that depicted the mountain in different

styles and from different points of view. He could never quite recall the name of the painter who had done the series, even though his wife and he had owned an art gallery out in Marble Falls. The truth was that the gallery was more a hobby than a real profession. When they lost a bundle, on the final scheme Tom thought might secure their future, Tom took the job at Burris, and commuted the thirty plus miles every day, into the Austin call center for the company.

The drive often took close to an hour, but Tom would listen to books on cassette, or some debates that his wife, who was ill and couldn't do strenuous work, would tape for him. Sometimes it would be Right Wing talk radio shows from the day before. Other times it would be National Public Radio. Tom could not understand, especially as one aged, how one could not get more willing to hear others' points of view, even if one disagreed vehemently with them. In the course of a year Tom finally got around to 'reading' *Crime And Punishment*, although he could not declare it a great book. He had had a friend who was an Assistant District Attorney, when he and his wife lived in Philadelphia, back during the Bicentennial, and he felt that Dostoevsky just did not truly understand the concept of human evil. Plus, his critique of religion was just too simpleminded. He much preferred the works of Mark Twain. He had read *Tom Sawyer* as a boy, then gone over six decades before he read another work by Twain. *Huckleberry Finn*, of course, was great, but *Pudd'nhead Wilson* was his favorite book of Twain's. There was something in Twain that anyone could relate to, unlike- say, Oscar Wilde. To be a Wilde fan required education and wit. Twain could evoke laughter from the dumbest and lowest in society, as well as the smartest and highest. On the other hand, he also listened to many a Shakespeare play in his two hour daily round trips, and found the Bard severely overrated. *Julius Caesar*, as example, was great for two acts, then became self-indulgent and a plain old mess in the final act.

Yet, as much as Tom enjoyed his late in life learning, the trip was just too long on a daily basis. So, his wife and he sold the gallery, and even sold their home in Marble Falls, and moved into Austin, a small apartment less than ten minutes away from the company. It was only eleven hundred square feet, but more than enough for two oldsters. Besides, it allowed him to get to work in a few minutes, and even be able to use those two hours spent driving to do a little extra overtime. He also switched teams and schedules during the fall so he could be off on weekends, to watch University of Texas college football

games on Saturdays, and the NFL on Sunday. It was, to a degree, a bit of a silly thing, but this was what his life had come to. Yes, there were people worse off, but they had been trod on by life. They had done the best they could and life trampled them down. There was an extra twinge of anger within him knowing that the bulk of his situation was because of his own folly. Tom was disappointed with many aspects of his life, but, at least, his wife Lydia did not hold his failures against him. Too many times he knew marriages flew apart not because of infidelities but because of financial problems, or the things that lay beneath- such as a disappointment with who the person they were with was really like. People married potentialities, as much as they did mortals, and when the potentials were never realized, the marriages would end. Lydia was not that way, and she did not hold Tom's investment failures against him because, at least, he tried. Few people in modern life even tried any longer. They are like mice on a wheel that do not realize running is futile.

That his marriage had lasted forty-seven years was one of the great successes in his life. He often spoke with divorcees in his job, and the bitterness people held against their ex-spouses were palpable. All women were bitches, whores, and cunts, while all men were liars, bastards, and scumbags. To listen to people who had failed in their relationships was to listen to the worst in humanity- not in what they claimed about what the other person in their life did, but in listening to all the excuses people made. When things went bad most people had an inability to ask what their part in the folly was, that maybe they had chosen the wrong person because they valued things that were not worth much. At least Tom recognized his failures when it came to the current financial mess he was in. If only others could do the same about the failures in their lives he felt that people would be much happier.

Tom was not exactly 'happy' with his job at Burris Direct, but he learnt to appreciate all the little foibles that the job he had presented. It was what some people might call *acceptance*. He preferred the term *wisdom*. After all, he had lived long enough to be called 'old and wise', so why not revel in the term? That said, he would not accept the little things he could change, but as he had no control over the idiots who ran the company, nor the idiot customers, there was only so much he could legitimately be angered over, the rest was all piffle. He was too old to worry about all the little things others did. Just show up, sell the book, and all the rest would take care of itself. If he was fired for



some reason, so be it. He knew he could get a phone job elsewhere, if needed- for he now had 'experience' as a phone rep, and he did have Medicare, at least, to fall back on. Plus, he had a lifetime's worth of experience to draw upon, to help him sell the directories. He tried to make little games of it, as well as really try to engage the people. He enjoyed hearing about what others did to live. There was a softness that age could bring, and this was not a softness in the head, but in the soul, which meant that others were given the benefit of the doubt on things that years ago were seen as manifestations of their venality or idiocy. Tom had never been the sort to dwell on failures- his own or others, but even had he been ago would have alleviated those feelings. There is a softness that comes with having been around longer than most.

Thus, each day, to him, was not a chore, just the brief passage of time as he waited to get to the end of things. He recalled several younger workers complaining about the night manager at the call center. He was the person in charge of the whole building from 5-11 pm, when it closed- a young man of about thirty, named Ted Varney, who was thin, with receding brown hair, and eyes that seemed to shake like Barney Google's did, years ago, when Tom Selleck was a child. He also had odd facial tics and contortions that made him seem like a human Bobblehead doll, and reminded Tom of the oddball comic strip characters he grew up reading in the colored funny pages of the Sunday newspapers of his youth. There was a current favorite show of Tom's, too, a cartoon called *King Of The Hill*, and the lead character had a dimwit son named Bobby. Whenever the son would get into trouble, the lead character, Hank Hill, would exclaim, 'That boy just ain't right.' This phrase was what ran through Tom's mind whenever he saw Ted. It was as if he was a weird caricature of a boss, or some nightmarish parody of competence. He also spoke with a fey voice that made Tom wonder if he was gay or not. Not that it mattered to Tom, for he was a live and let live sort of man, but Ted Varney's weirdness was just so over the top it could not be ignored. He wondered if the company promoted him simply because he was the only person who desired the job.

Ted Varney had taken over as night manager a few months before, from an ex-military guy named Jim, who had steel gray hair, glasses, and was a nice guy. Not that Ted was not 'nice', but his weirdness so superseded any other quality that any 'niceness', or any other positive quality was drowned out by the oddities. Jim had run a tight ship, and the inbound calls were fairly evenly

distributed, and people were not randomly switched between taking inbound calls and making outbound calls. This constant switching meant that the reps would have a harder time finding a 'sales rhythm,' something any rep understood, but which management never did. Ted Varney was one of those clueless management types, despite the fact that, according to him, he had worked a few years as a rep. This sort of manager- the one who comes from the bottom, claims solidarity with those he now bosses, yet still is clueless, is even worse than the type who've never done the job they are managing, for they are like new converts to a religion, and have that extra zeal that things can be done a certain way, even if they could never do it that way when they did whatever job it was that was under discussion. These sorts of managers felt that people were automata who, even when forced to read a script, should somehow be able to show their own personalities. Yet, if the person did, and somehow missed a point that was to be made in a call, they would be graded downward for the call. These sorts of management types also felt that call after call would be able to be handled smoothly and efficiently, with no break in routine. Tom, of course, knew better, just from age and experience, that an occasional two or three minute 'breather,' every hour or so, would help things flow more smoothly. But, people like Ted Varney could not grasp such concepts. They felt that people could just roar through calls, at top efficiency, and even scheduled the days accordingly, with most breaks and lunches coming early in the day, when reps were not as tired. Near the end of the shift, when someone needed a break in the last couple of hours, there were none available. The Ted Varneys of the world always claimed this was due to 'projected call volume', but any rep there till 10 pm knew that call volume dropped off significantly in the last two hours, making such claims void. The later a break could be taken, when someone was tired, the better. After all, any job can be done more efficiently in the first two or three hours of the day than in the last few hours. This was, of course, simple logic, human nature, and even most textbooks on management theory agreed it was correct, but that sort of imprimatur never stopped a manager determined to be dumb. This sort of wrongheaded philosophy was borne of the same sort of myopia that a phrase like, 'Believe in the book!' was.

Yet, Ted Varney did not have Jim's sense of discipline nor his management skills- technically, nor in terms of people. It was like replacing a fair but tough drill sergeant with a clown. That may seem like too harsh an assessment, but many people in the call center said far worse about Ted

Varney than calling him a clown. In the first weeks that he took over he instituted a plan that no reps liked. It was the sort of naïve, if not outright dumb, plan that someone who is totally clueless to human emotion, does. If a rep sold under the company sales goal of twenty percent for the day, the next morning they would find a sheet of paper on their desk with their sales rate written on it, and they were asked to list three reasons why they did not hit the sales goal, and also to list three things they could do to achieve it the next day. The company called this ‘self-actualization,’ but it was silly for a number of reasons. First, everyone knew that the calls were not randomly distributed. Some reps and teams got schools with good sales rates shunted to them, which left slimmer pickings for the rest of the center. This favoritism was ‘justified’ by the company by saying that certain longer tenured reps had track records of being able to sell certain sorts of organizations better than others. But, the result was that the rest of the center got lesser selling accounts, and it was unfair to grade a rep who was routed calls that sold at a 15% average to a rep who got calls that sold at a 22% average. Even if the first rep did his best, it was much harder to get above 10% if you start with such a handicap. Imagine a roulette wheel, with the slots numbered one to sixty-four, with the number one being the best selling account, and sixty-four being the worst, and all the accounts in between according ranked to their corresponding number. Well, if you deliberately close off ten of the top twelve accounts to a certain group of reps, they will naturally have higher average sales rates than the rest of the center. There would be some crossover between the worst rep from the better selling group and the best rep from the lesser selling group, but the averages would not be equal. This was simple mathematics, but it went over the head of dimwitted managers like Ted Varney.

But, even if that silly system was not the case on a particular day, there were simply some days that everyone who called in seemed to not want to buy, and said so right away. This was true, regardless of the distribution of calls. No one could figure out how such things could occur- that a single rep might get a majority of calls from grumpy people, while another rep, a few cubicles away, might have a thirty percent or better sales day, the type where one could literally fart into a phone and sell at the required twenty percent. The fact that the calls came from different organizations, from different people spread all across the world, was one of those inexplicable things that went uncommented upon. Even Tom, despite his wisdom, and time on the

job, could not make heads nor tails of it, and wondered if perhaps he was just seeing things that were not there; or rather hearing them. He tried his best to be positive, and slough off rude comments from customers, but raising his sales rate from day to day seemed impossible. Week after week, month after month, his averages stayed acceptable, middle of the pack, but there would be wild swings from day to day.

Ted Varney, however, not only did not understand these things, but could not even understand simpler concepts, like how his sheets requiring explanations of daily sales rates only angered reps, and fostered dissension. Someone else in the company, however, must have explained things to him, for after about two weeks, there were no more such sheets. Tom had worked in many different industries over his long life, but those sheets were about the most visible sign of out of touch management that he could recall. Whenever Ted would make his weekly stop by the reps' cubes, to show how much he 'cared', and how in touch with the 'little people' he was, Tom would inhale deeply, force a smile, and just listen to the idiot ramble on, all the while wondering if his head would simply pop off one day, due to how loosely it seemed to be attached to his body. The kid was a good thirty five to forty years younger than Tom, at least, but he could not work up pity for the fool. He had just learnt, over the years and jobs he held, to keep quiet in the face of stupidity and just let things run their own course.

Many of the other reps, however, took to calling him names, and making fun of the man's cartoonish appearance, and facial and body tics. Then, there was last Halloween, when the company 'allowed' reps to come to work in costumes. Bad companies always tend to do such things, feeling that being silly once in a while, or springing for a few slices of bad pizza, makes up for the rest of the year's ignorance of real problems, or the dismissing of real concerns. They did not, but even most of the managers were not inclined to wear a costume. Varney did, but was so clueless as to what he was wearing that it became the talk of the company. Instead of wearing a real costume-like a clown or a superhero or a scarecrow, Varney came to work in overalls, and smeared some black greasepaint on his forehead. His 'costume' was to dress up like a janitor. The company's real janitor, an older black man, did not find Varney's costume funny, and felt a bit insulted. He even commented to Tom, who was on a break, as he was cleaning out the trash cans, 'Who dat cracker think he is? He be dressin' up like me, as if I'm some sort of a monster or somethin'. Shee-it. If dat man weren't the boss I'd teach him a

thing or two.'

Tom nodded in agreement, and told the old man that he thought Varney was an idiot, too. Others thought even worse, and called him a freak. In fact, the name which stuck, and won out over many other candidates was 'Freak Boy.' Yet, Varney seemed oblivious to the anger and resentment his idiocy engendered, as well as never catching on about the name that the employees gave him. Tom Selleck took this all in stride, however, for he tried not to get too attached to such things. Burris Direct was a job, just a job, and in a few years- whether due to death, retirement, or just getting sick of things, he would no longer be there, and have little thought or care about what went on. Over the course of more than seven decades of living people like Varney, although they can annoy in the short term, leave little impression. They are so off the rack and there are so many of them that once you get as old as Tom was they fade into a gray lump of idiocy that is not even worth addressing.

Tom tried to focus on the funny or odd little calls he got. He long thought he might want to one day write a book of all the little anecdotes he had from the various jobs he held- as a banker, insurance salesman, Army captain, and all the other fields he had been in. This job, despite its limitations, allowed him an opportunity to speak with many people on many subjects, and hone his ability to pick out the best tales. Some were extensive and deeply moving, such as the calls he had with fellow war veterans. Tom had served in Korea, and while not one of those gung ho John Wayne type patriots, he respected the military, unlike some of the younger folks in the company, who were against the war in Iraq.

Other calls were plain odd. For example, in the scripts that had to be read for each call taken, regardless of the organization, one of the queries was to ask for first and last name, then middle initial. After that it was customary to ask if the customer had ever had a name change, because people would be cross-referenced by their current and student names, etc. Ninety-nine plus percent of the time this was asked for women who had changed their name for marriage, but an occasional man would have a name change because he was a naturalized citizen, too a stage name, or the like. But one time he spoke with a man who admitted he had a name change, for what turned out to be an obvious reason. Tom could not recall what school nor organization it was for, but the man's name was Frederick J. Cook, and when Tom asked him if he ever had a name change, the man replied yes. Tom assumed it was a minor thing- the way women change their names when married, and- in a sense, it

was. The man said that his last name as a student had been spelled C-O-C-K. He simply spelled it out, and did not pronounce it, merely to say that his name was always pronounced 'cook,' and he merely changed it to reflect that pronunciation. Here is where age pays dividends. Immediately picking up on the name, its implications, and the fact that the man spelled it out, and did not pronounce it, Tom merely spelt it back, and without a break in tone, nor a pause in time- not even catching his breath, went on to the next question. Of course, forty minutes later, when he went to lunch, he had to tell a few people of the incident, and beam with pride over his professionalism in handling the manifestly delicate situation. The other reps, of course, snickered and giggled, but Tom felt sorry for the man, and the fact that society was so immature that he felt he had to respell his name.

Then there was a woman named Melissa Visco. He forgot what organization she was with, but she was just plain rude, and when he tried to help her, she kept calling him rude. He said he was merely trying to help her, but she kept interrupting him, telling him how 'rude' he sounded, and he kept trying to merely help her. After about five minutes he told her that he'd spent five minutes trying to help her, but if she did not want to be helped, there was little he could do. The woman hung up on him, and Tom immediately went to his manager to have her listen to the call. The company he worked for was so paranoid about losing customers or their clients that no matter what a complaint was someone was likely to tell them they did something wrong, even if they didn't. It was thus always a good policy to report a call that went badly, like this one, before the customer complained. The woman never called in to complain, though.

There was an even odder call that he received, a few weeks later, this one from a woman, whose name he could not recall- it was something like Angelica Colamartini, who complained that Tom was speaking too quickly. In a Southern Texas drawl, he apologized and tried to slow down, but the woman, who was actually speaking about three to four times faster than he did, would never slow down to let him explain. This call lasted only about half the time the call with the rude Melissa Visco did, because the woman just hung up on him. Again, Tom trudged over to his manager's desk, to have her listen to the call. His manager said he did nothing wrong, again, and that the woman was nuts. As a curiosity, she looked up the code on the call, to see if the woman called back, for she said that she would call back 'to speak to someone who could speak more slowly.' Sure enough, his manager pulled up

a call she made just a couple of minutes after the call with him, and even Tom's manager was amazed that the woman claimed that he had spoken too quickly and rudely to him. They both laughed about it, and his manager told him to forget about the call, that there was no problem.

However, perhaps the oddest call that he handled, in recent memory, was from a Canadian college. The man had a really Anglo sounding name like Alistair Edward Fairmont III, yet he was paranoid about the U.S. government listening into his phone calls. He chided Tom for America's electing President George W. Bush, and that he was disappointed with his college for choosing an American company like Burris Direct to produce their directories. Tom tried to explain that Burris was the largest such publisher in North America, and that only a few other companies like theirs existed, but the man could not be persuaded.

He was as stubborn as the woman who called in a week or two earlier, and insisted that all five of her children had one syllable names. There was Joy, Lynn, Brad, Leif, and Brian. When Tom pointed out that Brian was actually two syllables, the woman did not believe him. He said he was positive, and then the woman pronounced her son's name, 'Brian.' What was even more bizarre was that she pronounce it correctly, 'Bri-an,' not 'Brine,' nor something like that. Again, Tom said that it was actually two syllables, and the woman again pronounced it, 'Bri-an.' She added, 'See, Bri-an....one syllable.' Tom just let it go, for his job was to sell directories, not act as a grammar cop.

Too often, he knew that other reps took too much of their job too serious, and often took problems home with them. Tom refused to do such. He was too old to worry about the fact that most people were borderline illiterates. Instead, he looked forward to the ends of his shifts, and driving home in the womb of night. Now, though, after moving into the city, he and his wife were less than ten minutes away from work, whereas he used to have a good forty-five minute to an hour drive. He sort of missed listening to his books on tape, and all the odd things and shapes he would see in the country dark. It was as if, every evening, he had been entering a new pathway to dream, one he had never encountered before, for there were no lights, none of the artifices of mankind, on the winding roads of the Hill Country.

But, now, all he had to do was follow the man-made repulsion of darkness, and be comforted as if by a translucent hand. Tom missed the danger of nodding off in the somnolence of the hypnotic headlights and rhythm of the

rolling wheels, the thrill of wondering if he was being watched- be it by coyote, deer, or even some greater force. That was all inconsequential, for in just about the time it took for a tired mind to lose itself to the hypnosis of late night driving, his apartment complex came into view. He pulled into his parking lot, found an opening only three spots from his door, and turned off the key. A minute or more passed, however, before he opened his door, and would take his final strides of another forgettable night, mere hours from having to do the whole thing all over again. He sat in his seat, and gripped the wheel firmly, imagining what it would be like to nod off, right as he had to make a sharp turn, and plow through some pathetic little railing, and finally soar through the wild like the beasts he knew as a child. There was a flash of light, and a shadow reared up behind him, on the brick wall of the strip mall directly behind the complex. Tom watched it rise, then disappear, like so many other nights, and held onto his steering wheel, hard and firm, hoping for the crash that he could never allow.



# The Silent Swim Of The Hawk

Some memories only return with the smell of burnt rubber and screams. That is, that traumas tend to bind themselves with great sensuality, and sensuality is a thing the human body craves. People forget that memories are not simply things stored in the brain, but somehow stored throughout the whole of the corporeal form. Other memories are more prosaic, and invoke simple head-scratching, such as asking, ‘What the hell kind of woman would name her only three sons Henry Exodus, Stanley Deuteronomy, and Alfred Genesis?’ Yes, obviously a religious woman; a ‘Good Christian Woman,’ some would say. But, the names were so odd and unwieldy that something had to give. It’s like when one encounters a black family that makes up the names of their children as if from a book of the worst possible names available. Of course, in this case, the book was known. It was The Bible. But that did nothing to ameliorate the pain such names caused. It would be a good thing if parents who name their children so oddly were somehow he’d accountable for the pain their vain decisions caused later in the child’s life. After all, being named LaToya instead of Susan does not fundamentally change the woman she will become. All it does is bring up specious comparisons to the wacky musical Jackson clan and that member best known for lying naked with snakes. Similarly, while Stanley was a solid enough name, where in the hell does a middle name like Deuteronomy fit in?

Unfortunately, the rest of the family was no better at naming the boys than their mother was at naming them. And, as for the rest of the extended family, I can state that my side was no better at naming us, either. Of course, in the true fashion of an omniscient narrator, I’m going to claim a form of privilege by denying you any right to know and snicker at the name I was gifted with. That said, there was always nicknames, although our clan proved equally abysmal on that score, as well. Thus, the three boys acquired the daily nomen of Hex for Henry Exodus, Stoot for Stanley Deuteronomy, and Agent for Alfred Genesis. Now, imagine going about your business, and someone coming up to you and asking you your name, and your telling them, ‘Well, my name is Hex, Hex Rutherford.’ You just know you’re about to get the queerest look in return. Then, if they ask you what your brothers’ and sisters’ names were you’d have to haul off a big explanation to get them to understand not only your silly name, but the even sillier names of Stoot and

Agent. I mean, Agent? Of course, the James Bond jokes were nonstop in youth, but what can you do? After all, it wasn't us that named ourselves.

Hex, Stoot, and Agent Rutherford. It was like an albatross that did not hang about their necks, but nooses that chafed against them, and those nooses were weighted down with an anvil. Of course, things had gotten easier on the trio as they aged, but childhood was pure hell. Hex, especially, tried to forget the past. Yes, he probably had the best of the three nicknames, especially considering they grew up in Texas, but even in this land filled with weird amalgams of many cultures, the name stood out. He tried to convince himself that his mother had named them as a sort of rite of passage, to test their mettle, or some other rationalization, but that was small comfort when he was called everything from a magician to a warlock to a wizard, and, worst of all, a *necromancer*. What the hell that was he never bothered to find out, because even the very term seemed to be silly. His belief was that if a word sounded silly to the ear, its meaning was likely silly, as well. And he was right most of the time. Did you ever wonder what a whirligig was?

Of course, neither of his brothers had it easy, either. Stoot was always called Stout, even though he was rail thin. Most children, you have to admit, are pretty lame and predictable in the names they choose to call other kids, and the rationales behind those choices. Imagine how the name Stout got twisted into other nicknames meaning obese, when he was so skinny, and having to deal with that. Of course, that was in grade school. By the time he got into Junior High things got worse. One girl, Marcia McGregor, whom Stoot had always been sweet on, even called him Toots, when she dyslexically misread his name aloud on a term paper, in the course of passing them back to the students with grades on them. The D he received did not sting as much as the accidental nicknaming, which stuck throughout all of seventh grade. Thus, he had to endure the named *Tootsie*, because of Marcia's slip up and the popular movie, at the time.

Agent got it the worst, though. With a name like that the inevitable James Bond connotations came up real early in childhood as well as the presumptions that he was tough and good with the opposite sex. Given that Agent was the tallest and gangliest of the brothers, the former assumption had some basis in truth, while the latter did not. Agent was a good scrapper, and had learnt fighting from watching the chickens in the family barn go after each other. But, this natural- dare I say cockiness?, did not translate over into success with females. Too often, he was seen as something of a feral beast, an

untamable bronco. In fact, it was Hex who seemed to work his magic over the fairer human option.

Yet, as he looked back on his life, it was ironic that he was the only one of the three brothers that never married nor reproduced. This fact he could not blame on his mother, nor her dismal name choices. Hex Rutherford avoided such conversations about his and his brothers' names by generally avoiding conversation. This was a practice he adopted early on in his life, and he stuck with it. Some thought him aloof or reticent. He just knew that choosing words with care was important in life. He was a large man, and his ten gallon hat made him appear to be a typical sort of Texas cowboy sort that few would tend to want to mess with. Appearance was everything in life, to most people, even if Hex never felt it so. His size and demeanor meant that he avoided many a fight, and only fought when pushed. This allowed him to avoid possible injury while maintaining an aura of toughness. That said, he was a man of gentle ways. This is not to say that if someone riled him up he was averse to a little asskicking, but he had seen his friend Alex Damon shot dead in a bar in Amarillo when he started harassing a much smaller man. It wasn't just that Alex had depantsed the man in public, but that he wouldn't let it go. About ten minutes after the humiliated little man skulked out of the bar he returned with a shotgun and fired three bullets straight into Alex's chest. Alex was dead before he even realized what had happened. Thus, Hex knew that even a midget could turn psycho, and that getting into testosterone driven situations was not worth doing.

The only time he could recall getting into something possibly life threatening was on a highway, years ago, outside of Houston, when, in a traffic jam, he saw one guy fender bender another and they nearly killed each other. He jumped out of his cab and tried to separate them, whereupon the two of them turned in unison and attacked him for interfering with their fight. A cop on a motorcycle drove up within a few seconds, though, and straightened all out. After that, Hex tended to let life play out. Being a hero, especially a dead one, was not worth it. He expected too much out of life.

However this was, unfortunately, not to be, for a good portion of his job at the time was driving a truck for an uncle of his. It was not that he did it out of any real need for money, but out of familial obligation. That's the way the Rutherfords were. Stoot and Agent had also driven rigs for Uncle Twee (short for Terwilliger) in the past, but both of them had their own families to consider, and didn't like being dependent upon the old man's moods. Hex

didn't care. This was because he was fairly well set for life, and his work was simply a way to pass time. He had come by owning some land via a scheme that paid off about a decade earlier. This left him in a pretty good financial position, and this also meant that Hex could spend his winters hunting, and summers fishing, in between hauls- especially when the rivers swelled during the rainy season. He'd go fishing all over the Hill Country, from Llano to Lake Travis, and knew virtually all of the best spots to fish along the Lower Colorado. He'd seen many a sight in his day, and heard many a tale, thus he had little patience for folks he knew were obviously bullshitting him, which was why he and his brother Stoot rarely got along.

Stoot was one of those types from a long line of bullshitters that dotted the Rutherford genealogy. Hex was not. In order to be a good bullshitter (or liar, as Hex preferred to call his brother) one had to have a good and detailed memory to keep all the fallacies straight. Stoot used this ability to do so many times in the past. This led him to a stint in jail, back in '96, but also led him to marrying Mary Ann Valeria, the daughter of one of the owners of the most successful meat packing plants in Central Texas. So, like Hex, he was pretty well off financially. The only one of them that had not had any success monetarily was Agent. He had married a girl from a poor clan in Volente, who ran a boat repair shop, and had taken over the business when his father-in-law died. It's not that Agent was *poor* poor, it's just that he *had* to work. Unlike Stoot or Hex there was no other option.

This also meant that Agent was the odd brother out in the trio. He spent less time with Stoot and Hex than either of them spent with each other. Not that this bothered Hex, as he had little use for his youngest brother. If Stoot was too much of a liar, Agent was too damned religious for Hex's taste. Yes, both of them were raised Baptist, but Agent had converted to becoming a Jehovah's Witness eight years ago, and after that, there was no talking to him. Literally, every conversation he had with Agent, be it in person or on the telephone, turned to God, and Agent's attempt to proselytize Hex, within three minutes, tops. Thus, the two brothers drifted apart. Hex would hear of what was up with Agent through Stoot, but eventually even Stoot started to drift away from him. The last Hex had heard- almost a year ago, was that Agent had actually become ordained in his church. Whether this meant he would give up the boat shop or not Hex had no idea. Still, if he had to choose between the two brothers- a born liar and a Born Again Christian, he'd take the liar, because at least the liar knows he's deluding himself and others. The

religious nut does not.

Life was a series of the lesser of two evils paradigm, he thought. Although Hex was not a particularly reflective sort of man, there were times when he did ponder such things. He recalled that at his sixth birthday party he felt a joy he had never known. Was it for his presents? Was it because his friends came over and celebrated with him? Was it because his brothers were envious of him? Was it because his parents made him feel like the luckiest little boy in the world? No, although all of these things were positives. Instead, he felt so good because, as he looked around the room, he felt that he was so much better than all the other kids who came. In that room, he saw Trini Dagero and Elsie Markham, two really fat kids that everyone made fun of. He pitied them for that, and how difficult it must have been to do even normal things, like run and play with others. Yet, he also was glad they were around, because he was a fit and healthy little boy, and looked even better by comparison. Then there were the Bartlett boys- Matt, Trig, and Troy, and they were dumb as proverbial posts. Matt was in Hex's class, but he had been left back twice. It was rumored that he even was a pothead. Trig was always failing tests that were given, and Troy was so dumb he was put in the new class for kids with 'special needs.' Hex loved that word, where special meant dumb asses. Then there were Cindy Crane and Melba Tolan, the two cute girls in class. Both liked Hex, and he liked the fact that they were both trying to outdo the other to get his attention.

Then there were a dozen or so other kids, most of whom were so worthless that he could not even recall their names, much less their faces. What had ever happened to all these losers he did not know, although he had run across Trini Dagero, of all people, a few years back at a bar. Trini was there with some artsy fartsy types and mangling a plate full of spaghetti. He was still a fat slob, and even more disgusting than he had been in elementary school. Hex wondered about that old saying, 'Give me a child till he is seven and I will show you the man.' It had obviously proven true in Trini's case, so he wondered about all those other kids. Of course, this was a fleeting thing, for life always has newer demands.

And, the truth was, he just did not care. That was because, this morning, Hex had no plans to do anything but go fishing, even if he had no idea where he was gonna do it. He decided to just drive around and land wherever he did. Before he knew it, though, he ended up near the old shack his Uncle Julius owned. Julius had spent most of his adult life working in New York City,

until he moved back to Texas about a decade ago to retire. Hex always liked him best among his family members, even more so than his brothers. Uncle Julius was simply one of those men that you wanted to be in the presence of. It wasn't anything like a sexual attraction, just that one had a gut feeling that a man like Julius Hanlon was important. Perhaps it was something like the fact that one of his descendants might cure cancer, or develop a rocketship to Mars. Regardless, Julius lived in the Cow Creek Valley, whose waters were little more than a trickle, on average. But, as this year saw deluge after deluge, Hex felt it might just be the best spot to go fishing. So, he pulled up his uncle's driveway, and saw the old coot just relaxing on his porch.

'Howdy, Uncle Julius, what's been happening?'

'Greetings,' said the old man, as he rushed up to embrace his nephew.

After a few ritualistic greetings, Hex was invited in for a quick breakfast, and Julius told his nephew about the local rains drowning out several of his crops.

'Damn Texas weather. Last year at this time, we was in the middle of the worst drought in 18 years, they said. Now, they say we're having the rainiest season in 42 years. It's goddamn insane. I tell you, last year I hauled in only a fraction of my crop because of dryness. This year it's waterlogged.'

'That's too bad, Uncle J. But, since everything's all fucked up anyway, what say you and me go out and do us a little fishin'?''

'Hmm....that ain't bad idea. Not a bad idea, at all.'

It was a few more minutes before the old codger was ready, and as he waited, Hex just sat on his uncle's porch and soaked in the low summer rays of the sun. Their warmth made him drowse. Too much of life was taken up with doing things, he always thought, and too little of life was made up of enjoying them. As the heat warmed his brain, it became more active with things. He had read somewhere that inside of every human brain resides the brain of a reptile, and like reptiles that only get active when the sun is out, so too does the brain get rejuvenated. His mind started to drift, to all sorts of places and events in his life, but, when he'd hear his uncle shout out, 'Just give me a few more minutes, Hex. I'se almost ready,' he started to smile and let his mind rove.

He recalled all the summers that he, Stoot, and Agent would spend with Julius, and his wife, their Aunt Hester (*God rest her soul!*). They lived not far from Shea Stadium, in the borough of Queens, and Hex remembered how taken he was with how big and tall things were. Even in Queens, he knew

that people lived like sardines in a can, and he could not understand how they could take it. Elbow room was supposed to be what every man wanted, yet the people in New York seemed to want the exact opposite. They seemed to enjoy living on top of each other, both literally and figuratively.

He recalled all the games his uncle brought the boys to. Even though they were native Texans they had seen far more Mets games than they ever had Rangers or Astros games. He remembers how the fans would urinate down off the leftfield bleachers and into the opposing team's bullpen. The security guards at the stadium would have to wait until the pisser ran dry before arresting him. Other times, if the leftfielder, Darryl Strawberry, made an error, or even if he hit a home run, the deep bellowing chant of '**DAR-RYL!**' would go up. Stoot was the biggest Mets fan, though, and he remembered how he wanted to go to New York, in the fall of 1988, to see the Mets in a playoff game against the Los Angeles Dodgers, but Uncle Julius couldn't get the tickets.

There was also the business their uncle was in. Hex never exactly found out how his Uncle Julius made money, nor how he could afford to retire before he was fifty, but he knew that every week his Uncle would take one morning out, and head over to a tax attorney's office over on Queens Boulevard. All he did was bring a brown satchel to the place, and then leave with a red one. Whether or not his uncle was into drugs, laundering money, or doing some secret work for the government was something Hex felt was not his right to ask. Yet, like any boy who had grown up watching gangster films, he liked to think that his uncle was a valuable man in some Mafia don's organization. But, whether or not that was true was of little relevance to him. Besides, after each delivery, Julius would stop off at the nearby *Nabisco* cookie factory, and buy bagfuls of broken cookies for pennies on the dollar, and he, his uncle and his brothers would snack the night away, with cold glasses of milk, watching Mets games on Channel 9.

When Julius was done dressing, he invited his nephew in for a beer. Hex accepted and then told them they'd better get going. Julius claimed that he knew of the best place to fish, about a mile upstream from his home, where the creek made a big bend around this giant rock. All the young kids spent their days off jumping off the rock into the deepest water, but since school had yet to officially shut down for the summer, the two men would have a few morning hours of good, quiet fishing ahead of them. Julius was a man who loved to talk, and Hex loved to hear the old man's tales of the old days

in New York City, when men like Frank Sinatra and Joe DiMaggio were kings. One of the things that Hex liked the most about visiting his uncle was looking through his old notebooks, where Julius had autographs from many celebrities. There was DiMaggio and Sinatra, Mickey Mantle and Herb Alpert. There was Roger Daltrey and Johnny Unitas, Woody Allen and Phil Donahue. Over the years, the old man had gotten to meet almost all the big name celebrities in New York, and Hex was as fascinated with why people who do one thing get fame and fortune while others who do other things- like driving a cab or teaching kids, do not.

About the only celebrity he ever met was an actress who had once appeared in a *Mountain Dew* commercial, back in the 1980s. Hex recalled it, because she was the sexy redhaired girl in that commercial that he used to get a boner over. He met her at a gun convention, where the woman was now hawking hunting rifles, as a spokesman for a certain company. He told her how she had occupied his teen fantasies, and the woman seemed genuinely pleased. After some small talk, he wandered off, and recalled that his pleasure at meeting that actress was not so much because of the commercial she was in, but because she had reminded him, back then, of a redhaired hippy girl he knew from earliest youth, one whose big, soft, warm bosom had cradled him as a child, as the hippies in his local town hung out and listened to *Canned Heat* and *Three Dog Night*. He knew nothing of that girl from his past, whom he had framed in his mind, save that she was important to him. She was his first proof of beauty, and that actress was a reminder of it, although, in the intervening years, he realized that he had totally forgotten the hippy girl's name, and had never bothered to even ask the actress her name. Such the power of image.

As they drove out of his driveway, Julius asked his nephew about his sister, Hex's mother, Eleanor. Hex told him hadn't spoken to her for a few months, as she had moved out to Sedona, Arizona, for the clear, crisp, and dry air there did a world of good for her breathing problems. He assumed she was doing well enough for, after all, it's usual that people only contact each other when things go wrong and they need some help. Hex's dad, Marvin, was also living out there, but he was slowly losing his mind from Alzheimer's Disease. If things got much worse, one of the three boys would have to drive out that way and make sure their dad was taken care of. Hex did not want to go too much into details, for he dreaded being the likely choice to do so, since he had the least tying him down in his personal life. Julius rued this



news because he always loved his brother-in-law, as if they were flesh and blood. It was part of the reason he also felt closest to Hex, whom he thought most resembled his father, both in looks and personality.

Over the years, Julius had told Hex many of the stories that circulate in families- the personal legendry, if you will. When they were children, Hex and his brothers could always count on their father to tell them the old tales of how he had met their mother- a woman who was acting in Austin with a theater troupe from the Bronx. She had been cast in a minor role in *The King And I*, and Hex's father had been there on a date with another woman. When he and his date went backstage to meet the actors and get some autographs, he took one look at Hex's mother, and that was that. She had written not only her autograph, but snuck in her phone number and a message for him to call her. His dad needed no further prompting, and the next night called his mom. They went out on their first date less than a week later, and were married in less than three months, as his mother went back to New York, after the play's run ended, packed up her things, moved down to the capital city, and was pregnant with Hex before that year was out.

It was something out of a Hollywood movie, although the rest of their lives were anything but. Yet, there was always something more endearing and charming in the way Julius told the family tales than the way his dad did. Julius had a more dramatic flair. In listening to his uncle relate the family yarns, Hex was able to retreat back to safer times, times when he was a child and the world was not as needlessly messy as it was now. Also, his uncle had a way of simplifying the messes that Hex had observed. There was the time that Hex was eighteen, and spending his last free summer before college with his uncle. They were driving out to Suffolk County, on Long Island, and got pulled over by a lady cop for speeding. He could not quite recall all the words that Julius spun, but was amazed that, within two minutes, the lady cop let him off with just a warning, even though he was a good twenty-five years older than she was. He had charmed her nonetheless. Hex, who was a good looking young man, in those days, learnt the valuable lesson that right and wrong were not nearly as important as charm and charmlessness.

As they were nearing the exit for the county road to the fishing rock, Hex had to stop because a schoolbus was flashing its red lights and had its stop sign extended. He tried to recall how many other times in his life these little annoyances had caused him to lose a minute here, ten minutes there, and what he would do if he had all that lost time back, to spend more

productively. All that waiting on lines- at government offices, supermarkets, department stores, banks, gas stations, etc. It was ridiculous.

‘This is bullshit,’ he said. ‘Kids these days think the world has to cater to them because that’s all it does nowadays. When I was a kid there were no buses stopping traffic, just so some little brat could cross the street. We had to wait for the traffic to clear, like everyone else. Parents these days think their kids are all special, but all they’re doing is raising a bunch of spoiled brats. Suppose you were having a heart attack or something. You mean to tell me that a little brat’s crossing a street is more important than your getting medical care? And, which one of these kids is a budding Einstein? Which one is going to cure AIDS? All I see are future accountants and plumbers.’

‘Don’t get so worked up Hex, it’s just the way things are now. Nothing you can do about it. Besides, the fish ain’t goin’ nowhere.’

Julius smiled as he spoke the words because he recalled that these were the same sorts of sentiments Hex’s daddy used to voice, before he lost his mind. It was as if little had changed in all these years, save that the son was now the father. As he gazed over at his sister’s son, his kin, Julius felt a sort of pride, especially since he had never had children. This was another reason he felt close to his nephew, because he knew Hex would never have kids. Not that it was a physical problem with either men, but he sensed that life, somehow, knew what it was doing, on occasions, when it steered the lives of certain people toward or away from certain eventualities. Not that he was a religious man, but this was just something he sensed. As was his feelings re: Hex. They were very much alike, and perhaps this was why they connected, even though- in Julius’s experience, folks with too much in common tended to resent one another because they reminded each other of their own flaws.

As they drove on, Hex was told by Julius to make a turn off onto a gravel road he had never gone down before.

‘You sure this way is the way to some fish?’ he asked his uncle.

Julius said, ‘Trust me.’

When they pulled over a small hill, a nice sized lake cam into view. The two men got out their gear, and from the top of a huge boulder, cast their lines into the water. After a half hour or so, with both men catching a fish, they spied something odd, off toward the middle of the lake. At first they thought it was a person who was drowning, but since they heard no screams, and could then see it was too small to be a human being, they stared longer.

Julius said, ‘I think it’s a damned bird that’s drowning. Must’a broken a

wing and fallen into the drink.'

Hex said, 'I think you're right. But, I don't think the bird is drowning. I think it's actually swimming.'

'A bird swimming?'

'Yeah, and not just any bird. That's a big bastard. Some sort of a brown hawk.'

And it was. It was a pair of large wings, moving slowly through the water. Then, another hawk seemed to dive near the top of its head, before pulling up. It looked as if the second bird had caught whatever it was after- a bird, or possibly a bat- they're plentiful in the Hill Country. As the second hawk flew off, Hex kept his eyes trained on the first one, the one still in the lake.

He said, 'I wonder if it'll drown? Probably didn't pull up in time after it chased after whatever it was aimin' for.'

Julius said, 'Naw, I think it got something' in its mouth. Take a look.'

He pointed toward the bird, and indeed it looked like a small bird or bat that was squirming to get loose.

'And lookee,' said Julius, as he pointed to a flock of crows that seemed to circle overhead. Apparently the hawk had killed one of their own, and the crows seemed to be chattering, as if to wish the hawk its own death, for killing one of theirs. Occasionally, one of the crows in flight would swoop in and peck the larger bird on its head, as if to teach it a lesson. But the hawk just kept moving.

As the crow in its beak struggled, the hawk extended its legs to full length, and started actually swimming toward a promontory that was about a hundred yards to the west of where it was in the water. The great predator did not move swiftly, as it did through the air, but it did slowly make its way landward, however laboriously and slowly.

Julius said, 'Wonder why it just don't fly off?'

'I think the water's weighing him down, and the weight of the other bird. Probably just easier to drag the thing ashore, then dry off, and then take off with the booty.'

As the hawk closed the distance in half, they could see that not only was it flapping its wings, but it was using its tail as a rudder. The wings heave up and out of the wetness, then extend down and out, in a great butterfly stroke that slowly pulls it and the dying crow toward the shore. After a few more minutes, as the last fits of life disappeared from the crow in its beak, its black companions overhead dispersed.

Julius said, 'You'd think the damn bird would get hypothermia, or something.'

At about ten yards from the promontory, they could see the hawk able to stand up in the shallows. It secured its kill on a jutting rock, after batting its cadaver several times, to make sure it was lifeless, then, after several bold flaps of its wings, finally got into the air, where it shook off the water, swooped about in a circle two or three times, then plunged back toward the lifeless crow on shore, and seized it in its talons. It seemed to gain vigor in the rising warmth of the air, the sort it lacked in the twelve or so minutes Hex and Julius watched it struggle in the cooler water.

As it left them behind on earth, the hawk and its prey got smaller and smaller in the pale blue of the Texas summer morning. Hoping that it might actually perch somewhere in view, on a rocky crag, or in a tree top, proved to be elusive, as it soon made its way over the top of the nearest hill, and disappeared. It was as if it had entered a place where only its kind could feel at one with something. Hex smiled, even though he did not reckon he knew why, at least consciously. His uncle, too, had a look of satisfaction on his face.

The rest of the day could not compare to what they had witnessed, even though they landed a half dozen more fish between them: three basses, a carp, two bullheads, a crappie, and a pair of fish that seemed to be warmouths. How could such a pedestrian catch compare to the hawk's plight, even if the fish, like the crow, exhibited diminishing signs of life. After all, the men had used technology and brains, while the great hawk had used sheer will and brute power.

Or had it? After all, it seemed to know how to swim, something even Julius admitted he'd never seen before. It knew to secure the crow's body on a jutting rock, and then even took off its kill to some place private. Perhaps the real difference between man and hawk was only that man saw a difference. As they drove home, late in the afternoon, Julius told him that the only thing in his life that he could recall comparing to what he had witnessed this day was when he was thirteen, and Johnny Lee Miller was hit on the head with a bullet.

Hex said, 'What y'all mean hit on the head with a bullet? You mean he was shot through the head?'

'No, I mean he was hit on the head. We was playin' some game with a couple of younger kids when all of a sudden Johnny got whacked on the

head, from above. He fell to the ground, and that's when I saw this bullet shell. But it came from above- looked like a 5mm Remington Mag, though I couldn't be sure. But, since it came from above, and fell on his head, we reckoned that Johnny had been clunked by a bullet that was shot at a passing duck or something, missed its target, and fell back to the earth to clock him. Had to be shot from a quarter mile away or more, and right up into the air. After all, what goes up- well, you knows the rest, Hex.'

Hex smiled, laughed, as he looked at his uncle, not sure whether it was just more of the old man's bullshit or not. And when he got home, after dropping the old man off, Hex saw his darkened house, and was pleased by it. He just looked at it, as he sat in his pickup truck, idling. He felt a certain comfort in knowing that it would stay dark inside as long as he wanted it to stay dark. That nothing that anyone nor any thing, outside of the sun itself, could do could change that fact, save himself, was a source of odd pleasure. And, as he imagined himself getting out of his vehicle, walking up to his front door, opening it, then turning on the vestibule light, and subsequent lights as he made his way farther into his unlighted abode, he smiled with satisfaction. There was something more than the act of penetration, though, which contributed to his sudden satisfaction, it was like he felt like that hawk must have felt as it flew off with its kill.

The nature of life and power were suddenly more real to him than they had ever been before, and as he sat, he felt himself drifting off to sleep, and owing to the day he had with his uncle, there was little he could do to prevent it, so he smiled, yawned, and that's when he switched the ignition key off. He was the only one in any position to do such a thing.

# An Eye Other Than Human

There is a place that seldom is traveled by people, and that is the gray area of the self that abides with such things as a love of cuteness, or the softness of memory in the face of things one enjoys without the benefit of any true logical reason. There are those among us who feel that one should take on the role of the discoverer, the scientist, the intrepid eye that has no peer amongst the many creatures that crawl and run and slither over the soil composed of our dead and discarded. To these people there are keys to what contains the human breast to be found in the slightest turn of a door when we were seven, or the intense blueberry moment of a cooling pie that summer the garbage men went on strike and Coney Island's already century old rot teemed in the nostrils as well as the eyes. It is the disjunction of such things that hold the hard, cool mind in place, probing through remnants of the personal past as if they were the excrement or bones of some ancient whale's skeleton curiously found at an elevation of over four thousand feet.

Former folks, of course, looked to memory as something akin to a slice of the divine; a way for a thin form of immortality to crawl its way between the vacuoles of the everyday and fill one with joys during down times, or relieve one of hubris after successes made one naturally want to gloat. The tendency, of course, is for all humans to go a little overboard in their reactions to things, at least initially. We then gradually restrain ourselves with age until, at the point most of us encounter our first wrinkle of gray hair we are thoroughly lashed by the accretion of pieties we have accepted, sometimes willingly, and others grudgingly, but with which we now secure our images of our selves to. It is from this human reaction that another is formed, and that is the desire to break from the bonds that self and society have conspired to form. It is in these journeys, that many deem quests or odysseys- as if to imbue them with a grandeur they usually do not deserve, that many of the rebels against sensibility lose themselves. It is not in structures but in epiphanies that they claim their truest selves.

Not long ago I was rereading the essays of the naturalist, poet, scientist, and quasi-philosopher Loren Eiseley (1907-1977), and opened a collection of his titled *The Unexpected Universe*. The first essay in the book was titled *The Ghost Continent*, and opened in this manner:

Every man contains within himself a ghost continent- a place circled

as warily as Antarctica was circled two hundred years ago by Captain James Cook....

Eiseley goes on to mention Odysseus, and generally well accounts for his feelings regarding how the world is perceived by humans. But, near the end of his essay is this passage:

One does not meet oneself until one catches the reflection from an eye other than human.

As I read it again and again I wondered if that was true. Yes, there is something to be said for seeing oneself from the perspective of others, but just how 'other' that perspective need be is up for debate. After all, who amongst us, especially those in the interior of this country, has not, at one point or another, found oneself under the immense dark gaze of a crow or raven? One might be walking along a dusty byway and a single bird, or dozens of them, set atop a single slender phone wire, will watch you, their heads barely turning at anything you do. Their eye is not like that of the urban pigeon, with all the mute stupidity of vermin, nor is it the carrion gaze of a buzzard disturbed over the remnants of a roadkill.

And then there was a film I watched, some time ago, but which has stuck with me. It is a black and white foreign film called *Werckmeister Harmonies*, by a Hungarian filmmaker named Bela Tarr. There is too much to describe in the film for me to go into here, save that it is about the loss of self to the greater in numbers, but even if there were more room for it, the attendant urgencies of the film are not particularly relevant to these ideas, save for a recurring motif in the film, wherein a traveling carnival, of some sort, has parked a trailer in the middle of a town, and the trailer contains the stuffed remains of a dead whale, whose eye the main character several times gazes into. There is nothing especially noteworthy about the moment, save for the effect that it has on the main character, who seems to want to both become more himself and more with the rest of creation. This is a different message from the film *Crimes And Misdemeanors*, directed by American Woody Allen, wherein an ophthalmologist gives in to his worst tendencies, and devolves into a remorseless murderer, as the film's dominant theme is the eyes of God are always upon one, yet it persuasively argues that such is not so, and even if it is, God does not care to act, or is impotent to do so.

And it was with all this in mind that, not long ago, I made a discovery. One not as profound as any of those mentioned above, but, to me, at least, a discovery worth sharing. I was led to it not by my vision, though, but by the

acuity of my hearing faint sounds from not far away. Of the seven kittens that the orange short haired tabby had, under the bush, near the mailbox in our neighborhood, only three would survive to adulthood, themselves. Two died within a few days of being born, never even being able to open their eyes and grasp the world that they had entered, and a third one died when its owner (as all the kittens were adopted out to locals, after the mother was brought to the local Humane Society) found out it had contracted some virus that there was no cure for. It was euthanized, after a few weeks of progressive illness, before it reached five months of age. That left four kittens and the mother to be adopted. To no one's surprise, who had seen the mother for several years about the neighborhood, she somehow managed to escape the clutches of the Humane Society workers, and make a break for the front door and freedom. As I had been the main person who brought the family to the Humane Society in the first place, I was not surprised by this bolt for freedom. The Orange Gal, as I always called her, was soon back in her stomping grounds near the mailbox, and just a few days after her escape, I saw her, as I walked to mail a letter, on a beautiful morning, underneath a bush across the street. I made noises by pursing my lip, to lure her to me, but she would not come. This time, sans kittens to protect, there was no reason to let me get any closer than necessary.

Orange Gal stood tall in the cool and cloudless morning. The warm breeze was filled with the scents of wild flowers, of the sort that litter Texas highways, and I wondered if there were many other moments as perfect as this in my past, ones I had forgotten? 25 years ago I had lived in New York, but now I lived in Central Texas, and never regretted the move. I then thought how to maintain this moment, so that in 25 or so years, when another warm breeze filled my nostrils, I could envision Orange Gal, still staring at me from a distance.

That's when a neighbor, a old man who never wore shirts on hot days, and whose sagging man-tits jiggled as he walked, waved to me and said, 'How ya' doin', Liz?'

I told him I was fine and saw the two dogs he always walked hanging out with him in his opened garage. I mailed my letter, then walked back the block to my home, and this time Orange Gal was on my side of the street. I stopped and held out my hand. She ventured a little bit closer, but not close enough to pet. She then turned about and headed back to the bush on the other side of the street. I wondered if she recalled me? Was I that thing that took her away



from the neighborhood, her home? Was I the thing that had stolen her babies? Did she now, a month or so after giving birth, even recall the kittens?

As time passed, every few days I would call to check up on the kittens. All were soon adopted, save for the three that died. The biggest kitten, the one that would be named Hercules, by Mr. Lopes, who lived on Vermilion Street, was an orange long haired tabby with a white belly- its white belly the only thing he shared with Orange Gal. He was one cat in a three cat household, and Mr. Lopes never let his cats outside. I was sure that Hercules would live a long life. Then there was the orange female, who was taken by a family in a nearby subdivision. She was an outdoors cat and I saw her for a couple of years, as I did my morning jog, until, as almost always happened, I saw a sign stapled to a telephone pole that stated the little orange female, who had been named Hilda, had disappeared. The sign was several months old, and, on a lark, I felt compelled to call and find out if the cat had ever been found.

I went home that evening, and dialed the number. I waited a few hours, to make sure whoever it was was at home.

It rang several times.

‘Hello,’ said the voice, obviously of a middle aged woman past menopause. Startled over such a thing I was momentarily silent.

Again the voice said hello, and she replied.

‘Who is this?’

‘Well, I saw the sign about your cat around the neighborhood and....’

‘Who is this, speak up. I can barely hear you. What did you say your name was?’

‘Liz DeMarco. That’s my name. You don’t know me but-’

‘Liz De-what? I don’t know anybody named Liz. Are you sure you have the right number?’

‘Yes, yes. I think so.’

Then I quoted the number I’d gotten off the missing cat sign.

‘Yes, yes. That’s my number. Who are you again? Are you with the cable company? I mailed in that payment five days ago. You should have gotten it by now.’

‘No, I’m not with the cable company. I’m calling about the poster you had up for a missing cat.’

‘Oh that? It was found dead a few months ago. Some coyote probably got it. Its mauled body was found in one of the cow fields. Is that why you’re calling? Is *that* all?’

‘Yes, that’s all. Sorry to hear about that.’

I then hung up. I found the woman’s nonchalance a bit disturbing, especially the grating way she phrased the word *that*. I mean, if she really felt that way about the cat then why make the poster at all? I mean, she even called it *it*. Not her or by its name, Hilda. I always find it odd the way some people treat their pets. I mean to treat them as possessions is bad, but to treat them as interchangeable items is even more deplorable. Then I wondered about the thing that killed her. Maybe it was a raccoon. Yes, a coyote could do it, but they’re quite rare in the suburbs. I noticed a tear had formed in my right eye and run down the bridge of my nose. I wiped it away

The other two kittens, both dark black cats with brownish splotches, were adopted by a family that lived only a couple of blocks away. They were called Tic and Tac, and they too were indoor cats, but with collars and name tags. As I would often pet them, on my runs, somehow feeling responsible for them, I got to know the little girl who loved them, Anna McGill.

Whenever the two cats were in the house’s front window, as I ran, I would hear Anna cry, ‘Hi, Miss DeMarco!’, then wave furiously and invite me inside to pet the two cats, both males, who seemed to eat up the attention.

One day, I was a bit tired from my run, and while petting the cats, and sitting on their screened in front porch, Anna started asking me questions, about what job I had, if I was married or had a boyfriend. I filled in the details and asked a bit about her. She told me her favorite school subjects, and how she hated macaroni and cheese, especially the kind she’d get at lunch. Then she told me about Patches, the kitty she had before Tic and Tac.

‘Patches died.’

‘Oh, I’m sorry to hear that.’

‘On Sunday it’ll be two years. I miss her so, but I do love Tic and Tac.’

‘I’ll bet you do.’

‘Wanna know how she died?’

‘Only if you wanna tell me.’

‘I do. It was my fault.’

‘It was?’

‘Yes, mama always told me that because they took her claws away that patched had to be an indoor kitty only. But I wanted her to be free. I know about the Constitution, and then mom got this DVD called *Born Free*. It’s an old movie about this lion that wants to be free, or something. And I saw it and thought that Patches ought to be free, y’know?’

‘Uh-huh.’

‘So, one morning I let her out, and she ran away. It was like she didn’t know me, and was scared. She ran for the trees in our backyard and I never saw her again.’

‘Oh, my.’

‘Daddy set traps to try and catch her, and for the whole summer I waited up every night to see if she would come back. She never did. Daddy said that she probably went to kitty heaven. And it was my fault.’

The little girl sniffled and put up a brave front but I could see how deeply it affected her.

‘Anna, you had no idea that Patches would get scared. I’m sure she loved you.’

‘Then why’d she run away? I think God was punishing me for disobeying what mama told me to do.’

‘Did your parents say that?’

‘No, but I read the Bible.’

‘But why would God punish Patches to get back at you, even if you did do something wrong?’

‘I don’t know, but that’s what I figure.’

‘Hmmm....’

I wanted to say more, but figured it wasn’t my place to say what or what not the little girl ought to believe in. But, it seemed a cruel burden to foist on a little girl. Yes, maybe she had disobeyed her mom, and that was the cause of the runaway and death of Patches. But these things occur in life, and people can grow from them.

‘Liz?’

‘Yes.’

‘Wanna know a secret about Patches?’

‘Sure.’

‘Well, one night, when she was a kitten, I woke up in the middle of the night, and there she was, sleeping with me on my pillow. She was happy and I petted her, and she squinted her eyes at me. I knew she was mine. I just knew it. Then....’

I knew what the girl would say. She would lament the loss of the little cat, and carry it with her until she died, too. Tic and Tac would be loved, even adored, but the hurt and guilt over the death of Patches, *her first cat*, her first love, would always be the greatest loss in her life: greater than when her

parents died, greater than any tragic loss of a husband or child, because it was *the first* and because she would always blame herself. But, despite this, I had a feeling that Anna would go on, and would persevere. As I thought these thoughts a wicked little smile came over the girl, as if she knew my thoughts, and was already creating the masque she would bear to the rest of her life. She would not be one of those people who used her hurt as a weapon to shame others, and in this way Anna McGill and I were the same sort of person. Patches would always run down the hall to her bedroom and always be squinting over her at night, but only she, and I, now, would know that. To the rest of the world the girl would become a woman of deeds and substance. The rest was hers alone, with a brief moment opened for me.

And there it came, into the void of the moment. It always happens to me. Too often and too swiftly. I am having a reverie, an enjoyment, and then an image comes screeching back. I am jogging. It is near the end of my run and I see a passel of five or six ugly buzzards, and know something once live is now dead. I walk toward the meeting place and see a dead cat's carcass, eaten about 75% of the way. The head of the animal has been hollowed out. Brain is a good, tasty meal for carrion feeders. At a certain level I realize that the buzzards are not evil, that the cat likely killed mice and small birds, then fell to a larger predator, or panicked in the headlights of an evening car. But, then there is the Patches effect. I think of cats, and even dogs, that I've known, and their almost human like qualities. They know love and empathy.

*Buzzards?* They probably kick their chicks out of the nest as soon as they can fly. Yes, it's a bias, but there is something of their shriveled, bald pates that makes them seem, if not evil, certainly repulsive. These are not noble looking creatures like eagles or owls. These are not intelligent creatures like ravens or parrots. No, these are the blue collar garbagemen of the bird world. And, to continue the metaphor, they carry their stink with them.

But, then it passes. Different thoughts came to me, thoughts of life and daring, honor and trust, and I recall Donna Dworacek. Here she is, in my mind, alive and aft and happy. To some she was the stereotype, probably loathing her too happy exterior for she knew that most men looked at her the way that I looked at buzzards. And, to her, the disdain of men was likely an otherness that she simply sloughed off. But it must not have been difficult because she did have a husband, Alex- short for Alexey. He was a man of husky build and even temperament. In a word, he must have been a saint, because to live with someone so relentlessly sunny must drain. I had worked

with Donna, and kept in touch after I quit, but she was in the periphery of another circle of friends so I would see her a handful of times a year, at gatherings and social events.

About five years after we met, and long after we worked together, I noticed Donna's sunny demeanor had changed. She was tense and worried. When I innocently asked her what was wrong, she said to me, 'Liz,' and then whispered, 'you've always been honest with me, so I need you to tell me the truth.'

'Ok, if you insist.'

'Am I fat?'

I was taken aback by the bluntness of the query, because Donna had always called herself heavy, tubby, chubby, and all other sorts of euphemisms for the word, although, in that moment, I could not actually recall her defining herself as *fat*. Momentarily nonplussed at the thought of whether honesty or discretion should rule, my words forced my hand, and before any inner governor could reign, I said, 'Well, yes, Donna. But you've been fat ever since I've known you, and you always seemed comfortable with that.'

'I have? Comfortable? I mean, you think I've always been fat?'

'Well, of course, you always joke about it.'

'I do? But I was never serious. I mean....well, here's the thing. Every so often I weigh myself, along with Alex, and he's always weighed more than I do. Then, this morning, I weighed,' she looked around, as if imparting state secrets in a John Le Carre thriller, and continued, '221 lbs. Alex weighed only 218.'

'Ok?'

'But, I'm so much smaller than he is. How can I weigh more? Now I *am* fat.'

This is when it struck me just how completely Donna's sense of self was gauged against her husband's world. Donna stood, at most 5'3" or 4", whereas Alex was well over six feet tall, so his weight was more spread out. Yet, somehow, Donna's image of herself was not the portly little couch potato she always was, but was wholly invested in a number alone.

She said, 'I know he's been losing weight recently, due to a doctor's orders to cut down on red meat. I told you about that internal hemorrhoid he had, and the colonoscopy that found it after he had blood in his stool last August, right?'

'Yes, yes, I recall.'

‘But who would have guessed that he lost so much, and would do this to me?’

The rest of the conversation was repetitive, and of little consequence, but the main thrust of Donna’s angst, and how detached it was from reality, was what sticks with me, for it was really her eye, looking at herself, that was somehow not human.

For the next few minutes, the gist of our conversation alternated between her self-despair and my distant nods. It’s not that I did not sympathize with the woman. I actually did, but only to a certain degree. After all, she was the architect of who she was. It was her distorted view of herself and how she should treat herself that was at the heart of her feelings of insecurity. That she somehow muted this with the idea that as long as she weighed less than her husband things were ok is of her making. But, I still felt that she needed more, although I did not know what to do.

It is always this way when I interact with humans. We cause our own problems, therefore I do not care nor feel as much for human ills. Animals, of course, are different. They are innocent because of their ignorance of deeper things like motives and desires. I sometimes think that maybe I should have become a zoologist or worked with animals. I just don’t seem to fit into the world of men. And by that I don’t mean the male of the species, but humanity. I think I first became aware of this when I was a child. And, in doing so, it makes me feel even less of a connection to the Donna Dworaceks of the world. They seem so out of reality that I cannot even fathom going to that place.

By contrast, I recall an incident, as a child, that has always stuck with me. My family always went on trips to New England, when I was little, and one summer, I believe it was in New Hampshire, we spent an afternoon at this small lake that had its own beach. It was the first time I could recall going to a beach that did not have sand. This was a rocky beach, and quite a bit different from the beaches on Long Island, where my family often went to. Anyway, after swimming for a while, I recall eating an ice cream cone that my mom bought at a nearby snack stand. My parents were talking with another family, that was nearby, and I told my dad that I wanted to see what was down a certain road. He told me to make sure to stay on the road, and remain within distance of hearing his voice. I assured him I would.

As I walked down the gravel road it soon gave way to dirt, and after another quarter of a mile, or so I reckon, although, when one is young, the world

seems much larger- so it could have been 150 feet. Anyway, I heard a few yips and looked around. To me, I was in the wilds of a forest primeval, and had visions of a wolf or grizzly bear coming down the road, ready to eat me. But, I knew my dad was always right, so I heeded his advice to not leave the road. I heard some more yips and started to get scared. They got louder and closer, and then I realized what it was. Heading down the road toward me was an adorable little puppy. I could see the top of a chimney, and smoke being released.. I figured he lived in the house or cabin around the way. At first I was scared the light brown puppy- probably a hound of some sort, might nip me. I knew that a cousin of mine had gotten bitten by a dog a year earlier and needed tetanus shots. So, I was wary. Nonetheless, he got me to trust him, and in a few minutes it was like we were old friends. He seemed to respond to the human voice, but he clearly needed to be at the center of attention. I soon heard my dad calling and told him I'd be right there. But the puppy kept following me. Several times I tried to outrun him, but to no avail.

When my dad called again I decided to just run to him. Naturally, the puppy followed me, and my dad asked what the dog was doing by following me. I pleaded that he needed to go back to the house I saw, but I couldn't outrun him. So, my dad told my mom he'd take care of things, so, together, I, my dad, and the puppy, made the journey back down what I have, in my own internal mythology, dubbed Puppy Road. We soon got to the home I saw, but it was clear no one was home. My dad was worried that, if the puppy followed us back up the road he might get lost, or wander on to the lake's parking lot and get hurt. He looked around, and saw no way to lock the puppy in the house, or even a dog house. He tried a couple of times to outrun the dog, by carrying me in his arms, then over his shoulder, but it was no use. The puppy could not be outrun. That's when my dad decided to walk around the back of the house, and see if anyone was there. There was no one. Showing both care and a bit of desperate necessity, my dad told me to occupy the pup's attention while my dad constructed a makeshift pen in the small shed with an open door to it. He moved several of the farm implements and a riding law mower in front of the door, to block the door most of the way, and then told me to bring the pup. I gave it a kiss, and cried, for a part of me already wanted to claim the animal as my own. Dad smiled at me, took the little dog, and gently dropped him inside the shed. I looked at him for a minute, then waved as dad called me to start the trek back up Puppy Road and to my mom. My last moments with the pup in my life were of oblivious

yips; be they of frustration over being set into a place it did not want to be, or over the sheer exhilaration of life as a young animal.

Many years have passed now, and the puppy is long dead, having likely become an aged and toothless geezer. Yet, its yips stick with me in a way few human faces or voices or conversations or moments of any sort do. I don't consider myself a misanthropist, but I do get frustrated with all the problems the human kind brings upon itself. Thus, I am always brought back to dogs and cats, and occasionally even other animals I might see lying dead on a roadside. Which returns me to the cats I see in the neighborhood. I wonder how often Orange Gal, Hercules, and Tic and Tac ever encountered each other in the neighborhood? There were several dozen other cats, too, so I wonder if they could tell their kinship, via smells? After all, it is well known that cats, and other certain animals, can literally smell death when it is impending. Then I wondered had the younger males ever copulated with their mother? Had big Hercules ever gotten into a hissing match, if his siblings dropped by, possibly envious of the freedom they had? These were the thoughts that were held in my mind as I would walk about my neighborhood. The real things that most worry of- lives, loves, jobs, saving money- were not my priorities because I just did not value them. They were, at best, accoutrements, not essential to the thing I- Liz DeMarco- am, which was what the second old man who lived a block away, and who had two young greyhounds- one gray and one ecru- used to tell me when he'd see me jogging by in the mornings (I guess old men with pooches are just irresistibly attracted to me). Sometimes he'd wave to me, and engage me in conversation. Were he thirty years younger I'd have thought he was hot for me. As things were, there was no worry, despite the fact he rarely wore a shirt to cover his horribly sunken chest.

Here was a typical conversation:

'Hey young lady, nice cool morning this morning, eh?'

'Yeah, quite a change from yesterday. The rain showers, last night, certainly helped.'

'Oh, I was wondering if that was why the ground seemed a little damp. It's difficult to tell after a few hours of drying in the heat.'

'Oh yes, there was quite an outbreak around 11:30 at night.'

'That so?'

'Yes, in fact, after it ended, I could not get back to sleep, so took a look outside my front window, and saw that the downpour had been harsh enough



that the water in the gutter lifted up my recycler bin, and washed it almost two full houses down the block.'

'Oh yeah, that's happened a few times to me. But, since I leave early for work I just have to put the garbage out for pickup the night before, otherwise I'd forget.'

'I know what you mean.'

And I did. But conversations like this, which were typical of those I held with neighbors and co-workers, were not the things that bolstered me. I desired deeper meaning in life and love. I had the soul of a scientist but lacked the mind. Sometimes, in the hopes of meeting someone of intelligence to discuss things with, I would drive around to local art galleries on my days off, and even visit some museums. But, as I was not in my twenties any longer, males were not flocking about. When a woman reaches a certain age she gives off an aura, I felt. It was akin to what I used to feel for Johnny Tamburello, back when I was a girl, in New York. The fact was that I felt nothing for Johnny, but I noted that almost all the other girls in the nabe used to feel the same thing for him, nothing. As the females would exchange 'notes' on the available male population, I found that Johnny did not turn girls on, but neither did he turn them off. To most, he was just a cipher. He did not register, even though most admitted he was a nice guy with a decent sense of humor, and a good head on his shoulders. The saying was, 'He'll be a good husband to some gal, but not for me, as he just doesn't do it for me.' And these were girls who fell for the liars, cheats, and psychopaths that abounded. So, their denial of Johnny, when confronted with his availability and generally good demeanor, was odd, even if I felt the exact same things; or, rather, did not feel anything for poor Johnny. Over the years, I came to believe that he, like some other men I'd known later in life, simply lacked the proper pheromones to attract a female presence. Sometimes, I've felt I had a similar problem because I'm not bad looking, not dumb, not too possessive nor demanding, yet men just seem to look right by me, on occasions. As my own love life stagnated, I found myself more and more seeking a rational approach to the question of her loneliness. NO, I was not a virgin. I, like Johnny, was reasonably attractive, and that's enough to get many males to want to ride your bones. But, like Johnny, this pheromonal lack- or, at least, an imbalance, had to be at the crux of my loneliness. In my head, it was as if I was writing a textbook on my lack of male attention. It seemed shallow and silly, but perhaps it was the only way I could pass off the ticking of the

biological clock as nothing more than a cultural phenomenon.

I often wondered what I would find if she was to look up Johnny, or the few other pheromonally deficient men I'd suspected. Would they suddenly have blossomed? And, again, these were not obese nor ugly nor nasty guys. There was just something that they lacked- charisma, maybe? It was not unusual for someone who was not popular in high school to suddenly become a hotty later, just as the jocks in high school often got bald and fat. In some ways, I think I had blossomed later, too, so this made me more receptive to the idea, although. I admit, if something is missing, pheromones or not, there's no forcing it, either for me, or for guys who don't get me that way. I had gone through all the soul searching nonsense, thinking that maybe I didn't really want to find love, nor was I really a person capable of giving or sharing. But these were all clichés. They did not address the reality. When I would be set up on a date, or place or answer an ad on Craigslist, I was always polite, tried to flirt, if the guy seemed attractive. I always put the other person first, as in wanting to leave as good and deep an impression of myself, so that they would be at ease, as I could, just as I hoped they would try to reciprocate and leave as good and deep an impression on me. But, most dates were wastes. Most of the men seemed to not really want to connect, and it had little to do with pheromones. They just seemed to be 'out of it'- life that is. It's amazing how so few people really have any clue about reality. There were the usual flakes, and often the guy would just not be interested and do the dread '*I'll give you a call*' routine, and not follow through. In my whole life, I had only done that once, three weeks after my twentieth birthday, to a guy who could barely grow a mustache. He was not one of the pheromonally deficient set, just odd, and although he genuinely seemed interested, I did not return any of his six messages, left over a ten day period. Yes, I said six. This guy did not have a clue. I often suspected that he was the first and possibly last chance that I would ever have at happiness; at least as that concept pertained to sexual partnership. It just seemed to be the proverbial story of my life.

Then, one day I decided to, on my daily jog, take a break, and walk down a dirt road, in a subdivision near me. It led off into the woods, and I always had wondered where it led to. Isn't that often the case? There are always these nooks of existence that are close by and which we totally accept without curiosity's call? After a good half a mile of walking, I heard a mewing, and a bouncy little orange and white kitten came out to greet me. I could hear, from the rustle of water in the woods, that I was near that stream that the overpass

on the road to my subdivision went over. I picked up the baby cat, and wondered, due to the colors, if this was yet another member of a litter from Orange Gal. Once near the water's edge, I saw the nest where a mother cat-not Orange Gal, but a gray and bluish tabby- was relaxing with the rest of her brood. The kitten that had greeted me was one of those outliers of courage-the sort that always push the boundaries for their kind. At first, I wanted to just bring them all in, again, to the Humane Society, but I sensed their peace, and decided against that. These were, I felt, destined to be strays, to live and die in this mini-wilderness, just a stone's throw from the main road. I knew there were dangers, for I'd seen more than one picked apart feline skeleton, and had marveled at the hollowed out head of a dead cat I'd encountered over a year ago, over which buzzards were still swarming.

But, these were all just images, tokens of something greater. As I thought of them my mind demanded more than images, tokens. It wanted the things themselves. Some people are lucky enough to get these things, without the middlemen of existence. I was not, yet I envied those who did. As I bent over to think, I was left with my thoughts, alone. Failing anything more tangible, I concentrated on them, with no reason nor justification.

I was there.

I was.

I.

# The Sixth Day?

For well over four billion years his line had survived. Sometimes, just barely, as when, in the late Devonian period, a well-plated fish, whose species never survived long enough to leave a fossil record, barely escaped being eaten by an ancestor of the modern tiger shark. Or, there was the time when a proto-primate ancestor of his just made it to the far side of his tree, and crawled up into the nest it had made in a hollow, to avoid a now extinct member of the hawk species. More recently- just a few centuries ago, in fact, one of his direct ancestors had somehow proved resistant to the strain of bubonic plague that swept across his Bavarian village, killing 324 of its 417 residents. Naturally, his presence in this time and place in the cosmos was not always the product of near misses. Just as often- in fact, far more often, his ancestors had been one of many survivors and, indeed, thrivers on the globe. Going back just a few million years after life got a foothold on the early earth, one of his bacterial forebears had been part of a wave of ‘super-cells’ that had revolutionized life on earth. Don’t ask me to explain the intricacies of the biology. Just accept that what I state is so- things will be much easier that way. Then there was the reptilian ancestor of his, during the late Permian, which somehow saw the changes that devastated the world at large- a catastrophe that wiped out almost 95% of all life on earth, actually benefit his lineage, as his ancestors were the top carrion predators of their day. A mere 56 million years ago, a rodent-like ancestor of his floated across a now forgotten inland sea, on a downed but buoyant log, and went from a struggling existence in a near desert-like environment to proliferation in a warm jungle environment, one whose evolutionary bottleneck led to an explosion of its kind, to the point of becoming the jungle’s apex predator within a mere dozen generations. And, there was an incident, a mere eight or so thousand years ago, when one of his ancestors killed off the head of the tribe he belonged to, because of too cruel and dictatorial a sway, and installed himself as chieftain, thus ensuring that he had progeny with almost two dozen women- one of which was the woman whose mitochondrial DNA now pulsed through his body.

Yet, knowing all this, he still held out the fact: on the Sixth Day was when The Lord created Man. It simply was, despite all the rest.

All of these thoughts abounded in his mind as he woke up this morning, the

first morning of the rest of his life, as he liked to chime in. He loved such pithy sayings, and, to him, the less witty and more pedantically trite, the better. He was one of those sorts who would love to see a saying scrawled across a piece of wood, burnished into immortality. Perhaps it was his Baptist upbringing? Perhaps it was his love of speed, and the fact that clichés so much more easily fit into one’s racing mind than the things that actually ennoble it. Just then, his cell phone rang, and it was his girlfriend, Stacy Mozier, calling. Stacy was a woman he liked. She had big tits, wide hips, but a small frame. She had a flat face, with high eyes that had an almost Brigitte Bardot-like quality to them. Her cheekbones were also high, and he loved the photo of her, taken from her cell phone, where she had her lips pursed together in what seemed to be a regal countenance, looking down upon the rest of creation. Those lips, he thought, were fellatio lips, and he knew their skill and taste.

He picked up his phone and spoke:

‘Hello?’

‘Yeah, baby, it’s me.’

‘Good mornin’, dahlin’.’

‘Good morning to you, too.’

‘So, why’s you callin’ so early, Cupcake? It’s Saturday.’

‘Just wanted to make sure you knew where we was go’n be meeting this afternoon.’

‘Sure I do. I got it wrote down just right....um, wait a minute. I know’d I put it here last night. Lemme check my. Ah, dammit, I guess I lost the address. What is it Sweetie?’

‘It’s at *Mac’s Barbecue*, right off of 377 and 17<sup>th</sup> Street.’

‘Dagnabit, you’re right. I should never have forgot it. What’s come over me these days I can’t account for. Is Lucas and Hoss gonna be there?’

‘Sure, and so will Honey and Madeline. They’re even bringing some fellow in from Eden.’

‘They just didn’t let the boy out, did they?’

‘No, Kal, he’s not a con.’

‘Ex-con?’

‘No, Mr. Smarty Pants, not an ex-con, neither.’

‘Well, you know, that’s just about all they got up in Eden. I mean, what does it say about a town that prides itself on being a jail? Hell, they even make money off the damned thing these days.’

‘Now, Sweetie, I thought you was Mr. Law and Order?’

‘I am, but one does things because they are correct and moral, not because one can make a profit off of it. To profit off a man’s misery, even if the person is a miserable scalawag, is just wrong, in and of itself. This whole idea of prisons as profit centers is just appalling. If you’re gonna try to rehabilitate a man, do so because it’s the right thing, not because it’s convenient for your wallet.’

‘No one can ever accuse you of not being a man of principles, Baby.’

‘No they can’t. If a man hasn’t got virtue and principles, what has he got? I believe in Jesus, and dagnabit, I believe in the Lord. But, I’ll take me a decent man who has not found the way over a man who brandishes the Lord’s name and then does everything against the Lord’s ways, and these men who exploit this are worse than the faithless, because they are the fallen.’

‘Well, Kal, like I done said, this fella that’s comin’ today ain’t an ex-con, and, as far as I know, he ain’t a fallen man, neither.’

‘Well, that’s good to hear. This area is too filled with folks who wear their faith on their sleeve. Brady is the plum heart of Texas, and if we can’t have God in the heart of Texas, then where else can he be found?’

‘Mason?’

‘Aw, sheet, no, Stacy. Them folks down in Mason, they’re too Godless for my tastes. I once went to *The Square Plate*, in downtown, down there, and there wasn’t even one thing that said it was a Christian environment.’

‘Well, maybe so, but I do love the little sandwiches they make out of them lemon bars.’

‘Well, I guess that’s what I get for lovin’ a heathen woman like you.’

‘I may be a heathen, Baby, but I’m fun as hell.’

‘You sure are. Ok, so lemme hang up, shit, shower, and shave, and then I’ll meet you and the others there, at Mac’s, oh, around elevenish, ok?’

‘See you then, baby- oh, and don’t forget to bring that little computer thingy of yours, the one that has the maps on it, ok?’

‘I won’t. Loves ya.’

‘I love you, too, ya big lug.’

At that, Kal Stevens put his phone back in its recharger, and decided to take a shower. That’s when he noticed the book of poems he was reading, from last night. A friend of his, from Llano, had given him a copy of the book *Harmonium*, by Wallace Stevens, that came from the Llano Public Library. That friend was a man of God named Derek Mother. But, much to Kal’s

consternation, he was a Roman Catholic priest, which earned him the right to be forever be kidded about being *Father Mother*. Kal and Derek had grown up together in Kingsland, when they were in their early youths. Well, that was not really true. To say that they had grown up together implies that the two of them had known each other for a long time, when the truth was that the boys had just met and become friends, one summer at a Christian summer camp not far from Smithwick. They then drifted apart for a few years, until reacquainting in their early twenties.

Nonetheless, and likely because of the poet's surname, Derek had thought it interesting to lend Kal the book of poems, seeing as he was planning to attend the meeting, this morning, that Kal and Stacy had been speaking of, which was a gathering of The Christian Motorcyclists Association, whose motto was 'Riding For The Son.' This was a few weeks ago, and it was only in the last two nights that Kal had time enough, after his job as a mechanic at *Bubba Phil's Dodge Dealership*, just on the south end of town, to read such poems. As a boy, Kal had written poems, but they were all the type that rhymed. His favorite had been *The Owl And The Pussycat*, although, now, for the life of him, he could not even vaguely recall who had written that poem. Often, at the meetings of The Christian Motorcyclists Association, Kal would read a poem he had written, from back before he was a full fledged Christian. No one ever quite knew what it was that made Kal a man of faith, but, to them, it didn't really matter. God works in ways that are mysterious, they all swore, so if making a former hellion like Kal Stevens one of their own was accomplished, what matter to them the Lord's method?

Kal's poems were not that good, in an objective sense, although compared to most of what passed for poetry in the last thirty or so years, it would be no stretch to say that he was, at least, a 'publishable poet.' Kal, of course, held himself to a higher standard, and often told others that he would not write poems again until the Lord spoke to him, and did so with a clarity that allowed him to make art of the Lord's gift.

Quoth Kal: 'It is not my decision to make art. It is the Lord's. I am merely his vessel, and submit to his will.'

Such steadfastness was what made Kal the leading member of The Christian Motorcyclists Association. Stacy was often left in awe of his insights into things. As example, there was the time they were biking down near Packsaddle Mountain, and the sun shone off of six trees or bushes near the top of the ridge. Stacy pointed this out to Kal, and told him that it was

beautiful. Kal simply said to her that it was God's smile down on Kingsland. As for how a God-fearing man like Kal and a heathen like Stacy got together and stayed together, well, that's a tale enough on its own, but the thing that made their relationship go was that neither of them ever tried to convince the other of their position. When asked, often by other members of The Christian Motorcyclists Association, why he did not try to bring Stacy around to the ways of the Lord, Kal simply noted that if the Lord felt he needed Stacy on his side he would summon her. All he knew was that he preferred her on HIS side. Likewise, many of Stacy's friends could not fathom how she ended up with such a religious man- especially given the fact that he looked more like a Hell's Angel.

As for this Stevens poet, he was different from both of them- way out there. Not only did his poems NOT rhyme, the way Kal was raised to believe the best poems did, but they didn't even really make sense. Well, it was not that they did not make ANY sense. They were not gibberish. It's just that they needed to find sense in their own way, in their own time. Kal often found that he would read a Wallace Stevens poem, be unaffected by it, then, hours later, perhaps during sleep, or a few days later, he would have that 'Aha!' moment. Kal reckoned it was like Chinese food, where the munchies get you afterwards.

As he stepped into his shower to rinse off and freshen up for the day's events, which would culminate in a ride up and down Highway 71 to Llano, to eat Italian food at *Bella Sicilia* for supper, and meet up with Derek Mother, to return the book of Wallace Stevens poems, he thought of how weird even the titles of this other Stevens the poet's poems were- and, now, now- yes, now, as he sniffed on a bar of *Irish Spring* soap, it came to him that these Wally's poems were the reason for his strange dreams and thoughts, of late.

Yes, that was it: *The Lament Of Horseshit In The Run Of Kemok* was a Wallace Stevens sort of title, and it had stuck in his mind as he imagined the close call of another of his ancestors who was trying to outrun a saber toothed tiger, during the last Ice Age, only to slip and fall in some ancient horseshit that was in a path, and that the saber toothed tiger only missed out on killing said ancestor simply because his fellow tribesmen came to his rescue, and drove the fierce beast away. Was this a dream or a future poem? Might he some day write a poem that had no rhymes?

As the warm, but hard, water of his shower ran over his naked body, he instinctively lifted up both of his feet, to inspect their callused soles, and see



if even a hint of horseshit was on them, as he had also ridden the night before. Stepping out of the shower, he dried his hair, and lamented how thin it was. Yes, he knew of male pattern baldness all too well, but there was something he did not like about the oiliness of his scalp, except after a shower, when his pate was dry. That's when his phone rang again, and this time it was Derek. As he went to answer the phone, a smile came across his face, knowing that he was going to be conversing with a man of the cloth in his buck nakedity.

Kal answered it and said, 'Hello.'

Derek said, 'Hey there, my boy, how's it going?'

Looking down at his crotch, Kal nonchalantly quipped, 'Oh, things are looking up, old friend. Things are definitely looking up.'

'That's good to hear, because I'm looking forward to seeing you, and meeting Stacy. I love the food at *Bella Sicilia*, and it'll be good to compare notes with you and your friends regarding the San Saba County Fair, this year. I think it's a fine thing, even if we'll be holding it down in Cherokee, this year.'

'Well, I think it's even better that folks from Llano, Mason, and McCulloch counties are pitching in, too. Y'all know how these people who grow up here just don't appreciate what they got. They think it's all about the big city; or even the little cities, like Brownwood. I tell you, it's a shame how things be goin' these days.'

'Well, I tell you that it's like that all over the state- and you know how much I travel.'

'I certainly do.'

'And it's good that Catholics and Protestants can work together, in Christ's name. We have a great opportunity, especially since the fair will be held on the grounds of the Cherokee Home For Children, to show that Christ is about fun, and not only boring things, as so many of the younger parishioners believe.'

'Well, you know that Tommy Morrison and I go back quite a ways, and ever since he became Campus Director he's been wanting to do outreach. That's why I hooked him up with you, Derek.'

'Yes, well. Anyway, I'll see you later today. Just wanted to let you know where things stood.'

'I appreciate it. Oh, and I will be returning that book of poems to you. I have much to say on it. Ok, ok, goodbye.'

Kal put down the telephone, and proceeded to dry and dress himself. As he had some time to kill, this weekend morning he was off, he picked up the book of Wallace Stevens poems, one last time, and read a poem called *Not Ideas About The Thing But The Thing Itself*. He had read it a few times, over the last few days, but was only slowly starting to warm up to it. It was one of those titles that just made his hair stand up on end. First, there was the title. Why so long? Wouldn't something like *A Bird In A Tree* be better? He had read the poem several times before even the title started to make sense, and a few more times before a few stanzas cohered. That's the way it was with words and Kal Stevens. Sometimes they didn't go in a linear way. Sometimes things just popped up at him, like an old lava lamp. It wasn't until he understood that this was exactly how the Lord made sense of the universe he created that it sat right with Kal. Still, he could never fixate nor focus solely on what the words were meaning to say. In his head, he always had a counter-story running, as if there was something underneath the poem that his mind saw but he did not, if you can fathom that. He returned to his own scenario, cooked up in the title called *The Lament Of Horseshit In The Run Of Kemok*.

He read the first stanza:

At the earliest ending of winter,  
In March, a scrawny cry from outside  
Seemed like a sound in his mind.

Ok, it is spring, and there is a noise, and it is a sound, but why in his mind? Is not sound a thing that the ear hears? Or is the ear, and what it hears, always filtered through the mind? He wondered if the poet was trying to make a distinction, and, if so, why? After all, it was as if someone would write that seeing himself in a mirror also meant seeing himself in his mind. It just seemed redundant. And where were the rhymes? He knew enough about poetry, from way back in the time he dated Sally Jordan, to know that most modern poetry did not rhyme, but there was still a part of him that preferred the poems he read of in books when he was in elementary school. They were rhymes, but that's what made it different than regular talking.

Regardless, the first stanza somehow translated into this: it is millennia ago. In his mind, or dream, or the mind in his dream, it was January 17<sup>th</sup>, 38,376 BC, and he was a caveman. Or, at least, he felt like a caveman. He tried counting backward, in his head, and wondered what day of the week this was. Yes, he realized that the names of days was still tens of thousands of years in the future, but, if this was a Tuesday and not Friday it might mean something.

What it was that it could mean was not immediately apparent, but just because meaning is obscured does not mean that it does not mean, right?

At this notion, suddenly, I appeared in Kal's dream, and I said to him, 'Because meaning is obscured does not mean that it does not mean.'

He looked at me and smiled.

He reread the first stanza:

At the earliest ending of winter,  
In March, a scrawny cry from outside  
Seemed like a sound in his mind.

Now he added *because meaning is obscured does not mean that it does not mean* to the line, in his mind, and it made sense.

Now, I faded, and Kal's dream took off. Suddenly, there was a large, giraffe-like creature towering above him. Kal, as a caveman, looked up at the creature, he seemed to be chewing cud, and slobbering some of it, and its spit, down upon him. Where had it come from? Was he there, in the dream? Where was I, or, more properly, where did I go? And what did this mean, and if the meaning is plain does the thing also mean, or mean what it means?

Kal looked up. Then, with a whoosh or a whoomp, there seemed to be a spear sticking out of the beast's long neck. Instead of spit, blood now flecked down upon him, and a look of terror lighted across the face of the beast. Fearing it might fall over and die upon him, Kal ran, in his dream, and, suddenly, as if in some Hollywood like music video, the text of the next stanza of the Wallace Stevens poem scrawled across the screen of his run:

He knew that he heard it,  
A bird's cry at daylight or before,  
In the early March wind.

Now, instead of a bird's cry, the text sort of mutated. I mean, literally, Kal's dream sort of melded into a phantasmagoria wherein the *h*, the *e*, the *a*, the *r*, and the *d* of the word *heard*, all became a version of the giraffe like creature, who started running, or stumbling, in the same direction that the prehistoric mindly version of Kal was running. The *h* saw itself become the long neck of the creature, while the *e* was a sort of sinister but knowing smile on the creature's face. The *a* was its eyes- or, at least, one of them. The *r* was a river of sound that swept over Kal, as he refused to look back at the beast, and the *d*, well, it really did nothing.

This was when Kal called me. He was suddenly alive and awake, and when he got me on the line, he stated, 'Les, I need to talk to you.' I said to him that

I was just headed out the door to begin an extra shift at work. Usually I worked overnights, downtown, as a night watchman, but, as this was Thanksgiving week, and other guards were taking off, regardless of getting paid or not, it opened up a gold mine of opportunity for me to swoop in and pick up some extra cash.

Kal said, 'Ok, but, can I call you tonight?'

'Yes,' I said, 'I'll be off tonight. Maybe call around 9 or 10 pm, 'cause I need to get some rest after my shift, ok?'

'Will do. Talk to you then, buddy.'

Now, you may be wondering how it is that I know Kal, and, indeed, how I know all the details of his existence, to such an extent. The answer, of course, is rather simple, and it's a rhetorical technique called *prosopopoeia*. I am me, but I am also not me. To what extent Kal is Kal and Kal is not Kal is a crux in this tale, and also a clue to what is really going on in the story and the poem by Wallace Stevens. You may have read a tale about me, elsewhere in this book, called *The Lonely Guy*, and if you *really* read that story, and really understood my character, it might not seem so absurd that the things that occur in this tale occur.

Nonetheless, I would speak with Kal later. As he settled back into his reverie, he read the next stanza of the poem, even though he had not fully digested the prior one, and was still lost and running to or from some thing that the large giraffe like creature symbolized.

The sun was rising at six,

No longer a battered panache above snow . . .

It would have been outside.

Somehow, every line that the poem contained, seemed to anticipate Kal's reverie. Now, reading it for the fifth or sixth time, it seemed to make sense, at a level beneath sense. He knew that the key to this stanza was the word *panache*, and he knew that panache meant having style, or flair. Then, it was outside. Just like I was, or he was, or the giraffe like creature was. He stopped, in his run, and turned about. Now, he was not in the picture frame of his dream. It was as if he was outside the frame of the film, and the dream he had previously been in was a rear projection, as in an old Alfred Hitchcock film. The large creature could not do anything to hurt him, and now he saw a pack of larger than reality hyena like creatures running beside it, as it woozily teetered to either side. One hyena creature leapt upon the creature's left side, and sunk its fangs into the fleeing flesh. Then, a second or two later, a second

of the pack deliberately, or by fortuitous accident, slashed at the large creature's right side legs, and caused it to trip, and land on some bushes. The slashing hyena creature was crushed in a ghastly sound, and its howls of derision and hatred for fate seemed to almost pull the dream Kal back into his dream's frame, whereas the hyena that had been riding on the creature was suddenly thrown yards away, with a sizable chunk of the giraffe creature's flesh in its maw. Nonetheless, the benefits of pack life soon became apparent as, with just a second or two's worth of recovery allotted it by its fall, the giraffe creature was doomed, overrun by a handful of the other hyena creatures. One bit at its legs, and severed vital ligaments, immobilizing the creature. Another ripped into its neck, again and again, looking for the jugular vein. Another slashed at it randomly, causing a slow bleed. The large prehistoric beast seemed to whinny in pain, its eyes bobbing in a see of terror and resignation. Kal could not watch his dream, he could only read to escape, so he did:

It was not from the vast ventriloquism

Of sleep's faded papier mâché . . .

The sun was coming from outside.

And, again, somehow, it all made sense. The creature's cries were not of a life beyond life, but of a life within life, bounded by life, whose boundaries were now choking it to its end. Kal opened his eyes, and prayed for the soul of this creature that, if it or its kind ever really existed, did so long before mankind appeared and erected gods to comfort us from such things. No, there was no vast ventriloquism. The moment spoke its own. His dream was, indeed, faded, but papier mâché? Yes, why not? And the sun, symbol of all renewal. He was a Christian. He rode for the Son, who he knew was the sun. It all made sense. Kal was supremely happy in the fiction of his self. The book no longer induced sweat in his palms. Wallace Stevens and Kal Stevens were linked by more than a surname, and he was smiling.

Then he knew what he had to do. He had to tell Stacey and the rest of the motorcyclists he would be in the company of, in less than an hour, about his dream, about the poem, about his understanding, and see if they could get what he did, or would they just glare at him, the way he once did when John Englehart, the man who had first converted him to Christ, had told him of the Lord's boundless love? Would he see a smile and eye roll, like he did the time he tried to debate a Hindu man he met at a mall in Killeen? Or, there was the time he tried to convince that young homosexual he met, in San

Antonio, that the Lord did not hate him, just his sin, and the young homosexual told him that he pitied him- that's right, the homosexual sinner telling the Man of God that he was the one to be pitied. He had to laugh at the very thought of that moment, but, instead, returned to the poem, because its immediacy took precedence over all others.

He read:

That scrawny cry—it was  
A chorister whose c preceded the choir.  
It was part of the colossal sun,

But it was more. The cry was the last of the giraffe like creature. He turned back, and there it was- a dead lump of flesh in a forgotten valley, swarmed over by the, now, equally dead killers. It was part and all. It was all forgotten in the colossal Son, and, here it came. He knew that he knew what was coming. Had the ending struck more plangently within him than he realized? Was this a thing he had to tell me in 12 or so hours?

He did not read. It just came:

Surrounded by its choral rings,  
Still far away. It was like  
A new knowledge of reality.

And it was.

Yet it was not.

*The Lament Of Horseshit In The Run Of Kemok* was the title of the dream, the poem he would write, but none of it came, this time. The dream was different. Had the poem of Wallace Stevens fundamentally altered things? How could a poem have so much power? Thoughts throbbed and surged, and Kal Stevens was in many places at many times having many thoughts in many ways.

Then, the sound: rrrrrrrrrrrriinnnggg.

This was when Kal got the phone call that the meeting at *Mac's Barbecue* had been canceled, meaning that he had hours to kill before he had to meet Derek Mother in Llano. Stacy had left a message that something or other had come up for the other guys, and that she, too, had- well, it didn't matter. Oddly, Kal liked the idea that he was now adrift, without a plan until he had to meet Derek. He liked the thought of Wallace Stevens' words riding behind him, in his seatpack, through the blur of the Central Texas countryside. As he was a Biker For Jesus, indeed, the only thing he could think of was riding through the Hill Country, down Highway 71. And, this time, he would be

alone, and was thankful for that. As he hung up the phone, he forgot all about the reasons for Stacy's telling him the meeting was canceled, and thought only of the future, albeit the very near future of his ride, his meeting with Derek, and his enjoying the food at *Bella Sicilia*. Perhaps this was God's plan- read Wallace Stevens, be alone, meet an old friend, talk of helping one's fellow man. Life was good. And if you were an auto mechanic and biker named Kal Stevens, it was good enough, good enough to last. Till when, only the Lord knew. But that was ok, too.

Within ten minutes that future had arrived, and he found that he was gassing up at the nearest gas station, before heading down 71. Sometimes, when he rode to Llano, he would take 87 south, and stop in at Mason, because 87 was a more rural road, with farms and vineyards on its way, but 71 was more direct and untamed, and the hilly scenery amongst it was beautiful. As he gassed up the bike, he chose beauty. As he finished, and went inside to settle up, he noticed a little, tannish dog curled up on a doggy bed, in a corner behind the cash register stand.

When he got to the counter to pay, he noticed the store had emptied.

Kal said, 'Pump 3, and gimme this *Mountain Dew*, and a Mega Millions for this weekend's drawing.'

The counter boy said, 'Ok, sir, that'll be \$24.85, with tax.'

Kal pulled out two bills- a twenty and a five, and handed it to the kid, who handed him fifteen cents as change, plus his receipt.

Kal said, 'Cute little doggy you got there. What breed?'

'Oh, Marsha's a mutt.'

'Looks like this little cockapoo I once knew, as a boy.'

'Cockapoo? Sounds like a parrot.'

'No, it's a mix of a cocker spaniel and a poodle.'

'Oh, I see.'

'That dog's name was Pooh, of all things.'

'Aw, cute, man.'

'Yeah, well, thanks, buddy.'

'You, too, drive safely, my man.'

Kal waved to the counter boy and took one last look at Marsha as she slept. He got back on his bike, and, usually he always wore a helmet, but today he decided he would not. Sometimes you just gotta let the breeze flow through your hair- at least what little was left of Kal's.

He got on his bike, and sat for a while. There it was- the dog he knew that

summer in Carlsbad, when he was....Why now? Kal wondered why his mind shuffled like a CD player. That dog. He did not recall its name, like he did Pooh's, but that was ok. People put too big a value on names. He thought this a trace of hubris. After all, in the end, Kal Stevens was meaningless, as a concept. He simply was the man charged with enlightening souls. Would it matter if, on his deathbed, he had enlightened 1238 souls, or would they somehow benefit from having the name 'Kal Stevens' attached to the enlightenment?

The counter guy looked out the door and said, 'What's the matter, pardner, feelin' a little queasy?'

'What?'

'I said, you feelin' sick? I got some *Alka Seltzer* in the bathroom. Feel free to help yourself.'

'Oh, no, no, I'm ok. But thanks for the offer. I'll be going now.'

And so he did. Kal made the turn onto 71, a mile or so south of the gas station, and within thirty seconds, was the only vehicle on the hilly road, as far as he could see, in either direction. On such occasions he would sometimes play games with himself, such as flipping a playing card in his mind, and then seeing its number- in this case, three, and then marking off the country roads that passed, and determining to drive down the third one he came across. In doing so, he found himself soon down an old paved road. Rural Texas was filled with such roads, and they were as potholed as the roads in Chicago, in winter. Nonetheless, the smell from the weeds that sprouted in the abundant cracks, aside from forcing him to ride at under 40 miles an hour, also allowed him to think more of things, and as the hum underneath his body lulled, so did his thoughts turn from the grayish-mauve of the hills to the sides of him to the dog he saw back at the gas station. For some reason, the idea of Marsha led to Pooh, and, as he approached one of the ubiquitous and often silly '*Historical Markers*' that Texas is known for, he decided it would be a good time to eat an early lunch, as he sat at the bench on the side of the road, shaded underneath a small tree, with a few cows looking at him from behind a fence.

For a few minutes, he just sat, and let moments wash over his glare.

There was the time he fell in love with the divorcee from El Paso. Her name was Frieda, and she had two small sons. Her husband had been abusive to the three of them, and then took off, after shooting a neighbor over some minor dispute. After a three day manhunt, he was shot by a sheriff's deputy in a



small New Mexico town, and sentenced to seventeen years in prison. The divorcee soon after filed for and received her divorce on the very day that she met Kal. He was, at the time, still a heathen, and they soon began a passionate relationship. Kal wanted to marry her, and adopt her children, and move them back to the Central Texas area, but the divorcee would not move. Kal would, and did. There was little more to say of the matter. Except, there was that time she made oatmeal for him, under a tree that he had no idea the species of. It was early spring, and already near eighty degrees out, before 9am. The divorcee brought out the oatmeal, and something about the cinnamon sprinkled on top was fresher than he ever recalled cinnamon being.

As he went to take a first bite of the oatmeal, Kal bit into his sandwich, and took a swig of *Budweiser*, and thought of the ride he had just taken. He could feel the warmth of his bike, just a few feet away, and his mind engaged in rides to places that were not there, but more cogently, were not then. He tried to remember the little dog named Pooh. It had been owned by his next door neighbors, in Ballinger. They were the Normans: Edie and Warren. They were a couple who were a bit older than his folks, and when his family had moved to Ballinger, the Normans had lived there for almost twenty years, raising a family- two sons: Brent and Trent, who had gone off to the Dallas-Fort Worth area for college, only to hear jeers from some of the other folks in town because, as everyone knew, *them folks up in Dallas and Fort Worth ain't real Texans*. To most, moving to the Dallas area was about as sensible as upping for a move to Berlin or London or Moscow. Why would any decent, sane, Texan do so? In fact, the only positive thing, over the years, that anyone could say of Dallas was that it once made for a good tv show.

Kal chuckled at that bit of humor, and, when done, a clear vision of Pooh Norman formed in his head. When he was growing up, his parents had never allowed him nor his sister, Charlene, to ever own a pet. He had befriended a few of the stray cats about town, but that ended after the third time he found one of them as roadkill and decided that caring for animals that one could not protect was a futile endeavor. There was also Lucky, the cat he found one day with a hunk of flesh ripped out of its back. Kal had reckoned the poor creature had been attacked by a dog, and figured it did not have long to live, for the scoop of missing flesh was all pink and he was certain infection would kill the cat. But it didn't. Three years later, Lucky was still around, even though the wound closed up to a grayish color, and sparse tufts of fur clumped here and there. What got Lucky was Micley Deistler, Ballinger's

sickest teenager, who bragged about BB gunning some fucked up cat to death. At that memory, Kal rose in the Hill Country breeze, crumpled his beer can in his hand, involuntarily, and, for a millisecond reckoned it was Mickey's right side cheek, which Kal had grabbed when fighting Mickey over Lucky and- the oddest thing was that had Kal not taken his trip, had the meeting of The Christian Motorcyclists Association not been canceled he would not have recalled any of this.

So goeth all things.

By contrast, the Normans' yard was fenced in and filled with junk, and Pooh was such a friendly little pup that the Normans did not mind him being the playmate of Kal. In their minds, having the neighbors' son take care of their dog meant they got the best of both worlds- a pet and no responsibility, while they could claim they were doing the boy a good turn, by letting him develop responsibility. Charlene, though, had little love for the dog who, for whatever reasons, never shined on to her.

With each bite of his sandwich, something new returned to Kal. There was the time some rodent tried to dig a tunnel into the Normans' backyard, and Pooh killed the critter. One morning, he saw a big hole in the yard, and the little pooch resting triumphantly with the dead beast's broken neck in his jaws.

Kal went up to Pooh and said, 'What'cha got there, boy?'

As he approached, for the first time, ever, he heard Pooh growl at him, backing up and revving his hind legs, as if to protect his kill from Kal's intrusions. He wisely decided he would not try to violate the dog's possession, and no negativity ever entered their relationship. For a good twenty minutes, he recalled just sitting next to Pooh, uttering whispered banalities about his being a good dog until with no warning, Pooh suddenly let the beast drop from his clutch, and let Kal inspect it. If Ballinger had been in a wetter part of the country he might've sworn that the rodent was an otter, but he couldn't place it. Even a baby wolverine, if seen this far south, would have been more than a match for Pooh. As the years widened between the event and his ever changing now, perhaps the rodent had grown in size? Perhaps it was just a rat? In Texas that meant they got long and skinny, so.... Regardless, Pooh was Pooh and the few remaining memories he had of the dog were good until, one day, when he got home from school, he saw that Pooh's doghouse and toys had all been removed from the yard. Every day, Kal had considered it one of the highlights of his day to come home and be

able to take Pooh for a walk. Although he knew that Pooh was technically and legally the property of the Normans, in every other sense he felt that the dog was his, as well.

When he asked Mrs. Norman what had happened to Pooh, he had steeled himself for the answer that maybe he had gotten out and was run over, like the neighborhood cats, or even that he had gotten some disease that the Normans had not wanted to tell him about, and that they had taken him to Dog Goodman's, the local vet's, and put poor Pooh down.

When he pressed her, Mrs. Norman replied, rather simply, 'Oh, no, no. Pooh's fine. We just gave him away to our friends who live on a ranch outside of town. We just couldn't take him chewing up the furniture and other stuff the way he did. But, thank you, so much, Calvin, for all the time you done spent with him. I'm sure he'll always remember you.'

At that, Mrs. Norman told him she had to go to the grocery store, and needed to lock up the house. She drove off with nary another word spoken, and in such a state of utter indifference that she just gave Pooh away, and ripped him from his surroundings, that Kal wished she would get into an auto accident and die, right then and there. He sat on her front stoop for a good ten minutes after Mrs. Norman had left, trying to stifle a tear that would only manifest itself at this latest bite into his sandwich. How could she be so cold? So indifferent? So like every other person? What was wrong with him, he wondered, for surely he was not the only person to feel nor notice such in life? After all the time she allowed him to spend with the dog, did she really think that he had no right to even know what they were planning to do with him? They didn't let him even say goodbye. Yes, he knew that some pet owners were cold and harsh, and wondered why they even ever owned pets, because he would hear them complain over some vet bill, or that the animal was injured in some way, but.... Damn it, if only his parents had loved animals as he did, then the Normans might have just let Calvin take Pooh.

As he heard a cow moo behind him, Kal turned. And saw little Pooh looking through the barbed wire fence. It was well over thirty years since that day he discovered Pooh was gone, and the little dog could have lived almost three full lifetimes in between, and was clearly long dead. The wheres, the whys, the hows, and the whos all eluded him. Just thinking about Pooh, just seeing Marsha the gas station dog, just having to stop at that gas station, at that time, to see that dog: well, it all seemed a conspiracy of sorts. And then Pooh was gone. The cows never noticed.

Parts of Kal's limbs seemed to go numb and after some heavy breathing, he started to rise from the bench, only to have a sad rubberiness infect his limbs. He had to ride again, and, internally, he chose six, and thus kept heading south until he would turn off onto the next intersection. He did so, and knew he was actually headed back to Highway 71 again. Having not fully put Pooh behind him, Kal rode on with a tunnel vision. Despite the beauty about him, the reason he chose to ride this way to Llano, he was unable to shake off notions of life that, when he was at his job, or with Stacy, or at church, he could easily dismiss. One of the reasons, in fact, that Kal loved to ride his bike was because it cast him out into the vast uncertainties of the world. It was in the waver of existence that one felt existence. In fact, existence was that waver, and just as Kal felt he had stumbled upon some great revelation, it all fled from him, and only the whirr and heat of his bike were left for comfort. Speed, too, but that is another thing.

Kal rode and dreamt and thought and left all parts of himself in the breeze of motion. Suppose his tire hit an old muffler, hidden in one of the thick tufts of grass breaking through the asphalt? It could kill him. Suppose a deer galloped out just as he made a turn around a blind corner? That could kill him, as well. But, those were quick, easy, physical deaths. He knew their risks and acted accordingly. What of the other sorts of death that harbored themselves in places in one's life that were not so real, not so detectable? Suddenly, he smelt a fire, and he knew that there was a controlled burn going on, likely behind that hill, to his left. He could see little puffs of smoke, and had this been a century and a half earlier, he might be in a panic that he had wandered into hostile Indian territory. On this day, however, it was merely a distraction from the very things that he wanted to be distracted from, so he rode, and the etch in the sky was removed by the mere turn of his head.

Then he was a teenager, working at an Allsup's gas station, doing the very things that the counter boy at the gas station with Marsha the Pooh-like dog was doing. His body had recalled this, not his mind, because the whirr of his bike under his crotch reminded him of the feel of the motor of the frozen food cooler at the gas station- the one that carried his beloved red, white and blue ice bomb pops. This led to other chains of recall. One day, there was a gas fire when a person, who smoked a cigaret too close to the pump, was careless. It took Kal and another of the gas station employees, several minutes to put the fire out, but the smoke coated his nostrils with a few decades' worth of fear and it got him to think of all the bad bosses he had had

in his lifetime, because this fire was directly related to the gas station manager's lack of caring to clean up the areas around the pumps, despite the warnings of Kal and other employees.

Of course, that manager, Wesley Hanes, was not a bad person, just inept at his job. He was only a few years older than Kal, at the time, so one could almost forgive his stupidity and laziness in not trying to make things safer. After all, sex occupies young men's minds more than responsibilities, even if the neglect of the latter can sometimes dampen the prospects of the former. But Kal had also worked for people who were real assholes, plain and tall, people who were, in no sense of the word, good people. Images of former bosses popped in and out of his head, and the things they did or said almost rolled into each other. There was the time Jerry Forspeth, the guy who was the backroom manager at the Anderson's Home Furnishings used to roll reefer out on the loading dock after Mr. Anderson, the store's owner, would leave, at 6 pm promptly every evening. Jerry would start the countdown an hour before the old man left and, every ten minutes trumpet an update on the time. Kal was both amused and annoyed, but this did not stop him from occasionally joining in for a puff with Jerry. But, the time Jerry accidentally severed a ligament in the leg of Barry Jones, one of the dock workers, because he was high, and turned a corner too quickly with the blades of a liquid propane forklift raised too high, was when Kal realized just how lacking in decency Jerry was, for, not only did Jerry try to deny that he had hurt Barry (even though several other employees saw what happened). But he tried to blame Barry for not announcing his presence around the corner, even though company policy was always for the forklift driver to have to beep when approaching corners and blind spots. Then he tried to threaten and bribe Kal into lying for him. Kal refused, and when Jerry tried to go at his false claims alone, he ended up being fired by old man Anderson himself. To Kal's astonishment, Jerry ended up blaming Kal for his loss of employment, claiming that a real friend would have lied for him. Those were the last words Kal had ever heard uttered from Jerry, and, it was only a few years ago that Kal had heard that Jerry had died in a drunk driving accident, up in Lubbock, back in 1997.

As for the aforementioned Wesley Hanes? Well, he was an even bigger pothead than Jerry Forspeth. There was one time- it may have been the late night shift at Allsup's, where Wesley had gone and smoked a joint while downing a six pack of Buds, and then fell asleep on top of the dumpster in

back. A few hours passed, and, while Kal was reading through some of the pro football annual magazines that made predictions for the upcoming year, Wesley stumbled back into the store and stood in the corner where the drain pipe was, and then unzipped his zipper and started letting out a full force of piss down the hole, as he exhaled and let out an orgasmic yawn. Kal did not know what to do nor say, so just let it all slide.

He finally said, 'It feel good, Wes?'

'Damn straight it does.'

'Didn't know if y'all was comin' back to us, after you had all them beers.'

'Oh, I'm'a always comin' back- you can count on that.'

'Ok,' said Kal.

'Hey, hey now, would ya looky here?'

'What?'

'Well, as I'm pissin' I see like three shadows of my piss stream on the floor. It looks like a- like a - well, I don't know. No- yes, I do! It looks like a trident of piss!

'That's 'cause of the three lightbulbs above you, the ones that light and heat the taco bar.'

'Oh, yeah. Right, man. At first I thought I was seeing things, but that explains it. Man, Kal, you're real good at this sciencey stuff.'

Of course, there were others, as well, but, in time, and at the speed of a motorcycle in the rural West, most of them fade in the rush of air by one's head. Kal loved to, on one or two occasions a year, ride his bike without any helmet. Texas was one of those states that did not have a helmet law. Yes, he knew that his chances of surviving an accident improved drastically if he wore one, but that was only if one got into an accident, and it took no account for the pleasure of wind through one's thinning hair. Kal loved the ripple of his scalp's flesh, too, as he lowered his head into the oncome.

There are some things in this cosmos that have no answers, and the reason that an intelligent man might do something so dumb and dangerous might be one of those *Just Because* scenarios. Regardless, as Kal Stevens felt the wind and the burn of the sun upon his partly exposed scalp, another helmetless motorcycle ride re-emerged in his head. He was in his early twenties, and traveling across the USA on bike, and he was a bit further west than he was this day. He was in the Texas spur, somewhere south and west of the Pecos, and a bit west of the town of Alpine. Kal never had a fond feeling for this area because, when he was a boy, he recalled his daddy being pulled over for

a speeding ticket that was totally bogus, as a local sheriff's deputy allowed the speeding vehicle- owned by a local merchant, to speed on its merry way, and claim that his father was the speeder even though, a mere few seconds before, the other local vehicle had actually passed his father's car because it was only going a mile or two under the 75 mile an hour speed limit.

Again, Kal's mind paused, and he said to himself, 'Why in the hell did that just come back to me?'

Nonetheless, on this day since passed, Kal parked his bike outside a gas station and diner he came across, and found himself sitting down, and eating a meal that consisted of a large cup of *Big Red* soda, a serving of crinkle cut French fries, a burger, and a chili and bacon burrito. The diner portion of the gas station could only hold a dozen people or so, and so it was on this late morning that a pretty Mexican girl, about his own age, sat down next to him at the counter.

'Hola,' she said.'

'Howdy,' said Kal.

'Uh, would you please pass me that newspaper?'

'This one?'

'Yes, please. Thank you.'

'You from around here?'

'Yes, my parents own a piece of land about two miles down that dirt road, out back. How about you?'

'Naw. I live back east, and have lived in many towns, like Brady and Ballinger.'

'Are they in the Panhandle?'

'No, a bit south and east of there, but where not far from where the Hill Country ends and the Panhandle begins.'

'Ah, yes, I have a friend in college who lives in the Hill Country. I've never been there. Is it nice?'

'Oh yeah, very pretty- especially in spring and fall.'

'That's nice.'

'So, what college does your friend go to?'

'Sul Ross State University.'

'Hmmm. Never heard of it.'

'You've never been to Alpine?'

'Sure I have; passed through it this morning.'

'Then you were nearby. Anyway, I wanted to know if that black motorcycle

was yours- the one out back.'

'Sure is.'

'Did you ride it all the way from the Hill Country to here?'

'Sure did.'

'I know this might sound impertinent, but would you mind taking me for a ride?'

'Not at all, once I'm done eating. But, you know, I have to ask, hasn't yo' mama ever said that it's dangerous to hitchhike with strangers.'

'Yes she has, but there's always a way around such things. Most things have ways around.'

'Oh, really?'

'Yes. My name is Tiara. Tiara Martinez.'

'I'm Kal Stevens, and that sure is a pretty name you got there. Tiara- ain't that like a crown? You a princess or something?'

'My daddy calls me that, his little princess. And you're sort of right about a tiara. I don't own one, though. I am one.'

At that, Kal had finished his meal and small talk, and he and his new lady friend headed out back to his bike where he got on, and Tiara got settled in behind him, after letting down her long, black hair and borrowing his helmet.

'You don't mind, do you?' she said.

'If I did I wouldn't say so,' and, at that, he revved his engine and off the two of them sped. It would be about six weeks before the two of them got off that bike and back into reality. Ok, that was a blatant metaphor. Obviously, the two young people, who soon became lovers, got off the motorcycle, and how they fell in love is really not the point of this story, but they did, and they had a wonderful time. You can fill in the rest. Then, one evening, in the seventh week after their chance acquaintance, Tiara and Kal started talking about the assorted jobs they had had, and how they hated working for others, when they had no real chance of advancement. Why this conversation remained with him, above all the others, was a mystery he could not pin down. Perhaps it was the act of commiseration always bonded people, as it occurred, or even in recall? Anyway, both of them had worked in retail stores, and both in supermarkets. Kal had worked at a locally owned chain, when he was 17, called Donaldson's Fine Meats And Groceries, while Tiara had worked for Culbertson's, a small grocery chain, with a store in Alpine, when she was a teenager, as well.

In comparing their tales of woe, Kal said, 'Well, let me tell you about two



other idiots I worked with. There was this guy named James- and, get this- he used to be a grocery manager. I mean, he wasn't when I worked for him, because, for some reason, when he came to our store, he had been demoted. I didn't know whether or not he had been demoted, actually, or, like the night manager guy I was mentioning, he had just given up his position. Maybe managing was just too costly in personal time and he preferred to spend time with his kids? I didn't know, until, one time, I had to work with him, saw what a lazy bastard he was, and told my own manager of it, and he accidentally let it slip that James had actually been demoted. I wondered why, since the company had such lousy managers to begin with, but was never motivated enough to find out. Nonetheless, I've known other people, over the years, who gave up on such stuff. I've also known people who give up on being good workers, and this James guy was both- these guys sort of get to a certain place in their life or job and they feel the company owes them something. You know, they feel that they are beyond the usual daily bullshit, and once that occurs once too often they just tune out. And they may be right, but then they get this sense of entitlement where they think they can screw around and have others pick up their slack which, of course, only creates future employees who will pass on the same attitude later. I mean, they became the way they are because earlier guys had the attitude that they, first, despised, and, later, embraced as almost inevitable because, by that point, it favored their way of seeing the world.

But, the point is that he was not that good a worker- ok, solid, but nothing special. He was not good at ordering, and not good at much. The other workers often complained about how he would spend way too much time just leveling the aisles- you know, where you pull product forward to the edge of the shelf to make it look full?'

Tiara said, 'Yes, I know. We would have to do that, but our company called it fronting. I always thought it was a big waste of time.'

'Yeah, I mean, I never, in all my years doing that sort of work, ever had a customer come up to me and say how wonderful the aisles looked. All they ever cared about was whether or not we had what they wanted at the advertised price. I mean, it's really simple, but the people who run these companies just don't get it.'

'Yeah.'

'Anyway, for a while they had him running the frozen food department, at the same time that I was working the frozen meats for the meat department.

Well, what happened was this: for a few months the frozen guys were always tossing their crap on top of the organized meat carts that I left- you know- broken products, damages, stolen or discarded or destroyed cartons? Well, then I started finding deliberately opened and destroyed meat products. Now, I knew the frozen guys did the same to other departments, like the deli, seafood, and bakery departments, which also shared the frozen box space, and they did this because they resented that fact, and I was the only one who ordered well and kept the overstock, or backstock, down. It's always that way, wherein people who are not good at something resent those who are better, rather than emulating them. Anyway, a series of events happened: I kept finding deliberately destroyed merchandise from the meat department, so I started taking note of the days that this happened, and I narrowed it down to this one young guy who worked in frozen. We had these two deaf kids who worked overnight in the frozen department- a white kid and a black kid. The black kid was a good worker, but there were times when he was off and there was merchandise destroyed. But, on the days the white kid did not work the merchandise was never destroyed. So, initially I had thought it had to be the deaf white kid who was the culprit. But, then there were some days where merchandise was destroyed and he was not there, so that's when I started suspecting James. He just had this attitude of *the entitled asshole*, you know? So I started to think that both he and the deaf white kid were destroying stuff. Whether or not they knew of what the other one was doing I'm not sure of, but, statistically, it had to be one of, or both of, them.

So, then I teamed up with the woman who ran the receiving department. You see, the store donated outdated food to a local food bank, as well as some fresher stuff. But, it had to be stored in the frozen box for pickup. So, as with the stuff for the other departments, there was stuff for the food bank that was in the frozen box, and it too was being destroyed, and having stuff tossed on it. This meant that when the food bank people came to pick up their stuff they would have to sort through garbage, literally. So the receiving woman complained, and I told her about what the frozen guys were doing to our stuff, so we set a little trap, so to speak. You see, what we did was, at a certain time, take a photo of the pallet of food bank donation stuff, to show that it was neat and undestroyed, then, a few hours later, photographed it again to show the time frame for when it had been screwed with, and this proved that there could only have been James or the deaf white kid who screwed it over. But, this didn't even seem to be enough proof. Hell, I even

got managers to see the crap that was being destroyed, and even got that asshole number two boss in the store to take photos one morning when product was being deliberately put in places to cause carts of merchandise to fall over. But, even that was not enough.. Then, I saw the guy, James, trying to sabotage one of the meat carts, so that product would fall off it and get damaged. No need to detail how, just that the point is I SAW this guy doing it. Initially, like I said, I thought it was one of the punk kids, but, while I still think one of those punks did things to destroy merchandise, I was a hundred percent sure that this James did things he should not have done.'

'So, nothing happened to him?'

'Oh, of course not. That's the way it always goes, you know?'

'Yes, I know. Well, let me tell you about my little story. I mean, at least this James man was not someone you had to work for.'

'Well, here and there I would work with him, to help out, but never for a long period of time. But, anyway, go on with what you were saying,' said Kal.

'Well, I worked in the meat department of the store I worked in, and we actually had a nice meat manager, for a while. He was this middle aged man, a bit overweight, with eyeglasses. But he was nice, easy to work for, easy to get along with, and, basically, I had no problems at all with him. In fact, everyone who worked for him loved working for him. You know what I mean, Kal, he was the kind of guy who, if he said that there needed to be some extra work done today because a company big shot was visiting the store, well, people would work harder- even work through a break, you know?'

'Yeah, there are always a few of those types in any job- in any social situation, in fact.'

'But he would acknowledge you, you know? I mean, if you made a mistake he would point it out, and explain why it was an error, but then he would let it go.'

'And then he left, right? Retired?'

'No, but he transferred, and then they brought in this woman to the job, and she was horrible. She had no ability to deal with and relate to people, she had no business sense. I mean, she would lecture about product placement, but then bring in obviously bad sellers and then wonder why we were losing money when the things went out of date.'

'I know the type,' said Kal.

But, the problems were more than that. I mean, she was a liar. She'd claim she told you to do something, when she hadn't, then try to make it look like you hadn't done something, and everyone in the department had a story like that. One time she even told me that she had told me something the week before, on a Thursday, a day when I was off. I told her I was off and she could see so on the schedule, so, in fact, she probably had told this guy named Dix, who worked that day, but how could she mess it up. I mean, I'm a Mexican woman who's 5'3" and short, while Dix was a husky, white guy over six feet tall. And he wore eyeglasses, so it was not easy to confuse us, but she did.'

'Yeah, I've been there, too. Those types never learn, even when you catch'em in a lie.'

'Well, the meat department problems were more than just those things. There was also a problem with the schedules: for vacation stuff, and with regular schedules, every week. As example, we always worked a graveyard shift in the cold cuts section.'

'Graveyard, I know what that's like.'

'Yeah, basically working when you start in the early morning hours, as opposed to *'overnight,'* which means starting before midnight.'

'I found that, no matter how hard I tried to catch up on sleep, I never did. I was always tired in those days.'

'Yeah, well, you would think they would try to make things easier on the employees, like giving them back to back nights off to catch up on their sleep,' said Tiara.

'Yes, but, I'll bet that was a problem, right?'

'Oh, of course. But, not only was giving back to back nights off a problem, but then they started screwing around with the shifts, as well. For the longest time- since the store opened, in fact, the shift for the cold cuts sections was always 1-9 am, but then, out of the blue, the dumb meat manager, with no objections from the number two manager. Who was tolerable under the good manager who left, but sucked under the new bad manager, changed our shifts to 2-10 am. Why? Because she wanted us to 'bond more' with us, yet also to get the work done more quickly, even though we were starting an hour later than we always had. All four of us objected: me, the woman who was the cold cut lead, and the two other workers. But they didn't give a damn, even though it meant having to shift our bodily routines. I mean, it's difficult to work those sorts of hours. It's why so few people work early morning or

overnight shifts. It wears you down and makes you more susceptible to illness, not to mention that it's a proven fact that more accidents occur late at night and in early morning hours. Human beings are just not nocturnal. But they didn't give a damn, even with all their talk about respect and that kind of crap.

But that wasn't all. This one gal, in the cold cuts section, was home schooling her kids, and asked for a reasonable thing: to have the same days off every week. They didn't do it. The other guy in the department kept asking to have back to back days off, like I said, because you never fully catch up on your sleep anyway, but you come alot closer to doing so when you get that second straight night of sleep in. And I repeatedly asked for them to not always be switching the days off I had in a week. Like, one week I'd be off Thursday and Friday, and then Monday and Tuesday. This meant when I had a Thursday and Friday off week after a Monday and Tuesday off week I'd end up working 8 full days in a row, which is a killer- sometimes it could be ten days in a row. Yet, when I asked for that I never got it. At my evaluation I brought this up and was told that I had an open availability for scheduling and not to complain. This was true, but there's absolutely no reason all of our requests could not have been honored most weeks. I know, because I had worked and done schedules in another department, and it's easy as sin to do. But neither manager gave a damn about any of us. In fact, some weeks it seemed like they were intentionally trying to screw us. I once had a run of 4 or 5 times in 9 weeks of having to work seven or more days in a row. And then there were weeks where they staggered the shifts of me and the other guy.'

'What does that mean- *staggered*?'

Tiara said, 'Oh, well, like he'd get off on a Tuesday, then I'd be off on Wednesday, then he'd get off Thursday, and I'd get Friday off. I pointed out that there was no reason he could not have had Tuesday and Wednesday off, while I got Thursday and Friday off, or vice-versa, but all the idiots could do was ignore me, and say they'd '*look at the schedule.*' My ass! That's why the other guy left the department and I followed. I mean, it's hard work, and I, especially, don't just stand around. I'm a great worker. I'm not only a hard worker, but I work very well. I could out-order any of those idiots.'

'I do not doubt it. You are proud and determined. I could tell that from when we first met. It's one of your best qualities.'

'And these two managers were such kissasses, too. The woman manager

would come in on days off, and pretend she had no idea of the schedule, so to try and impress the bigger bosses with her *dedication*, so that they'd ask what she was doing in on her days off, and she'd say she was helping out.'

'But wouldn't they get angry to have to pay overtime?'

'No, because meat managers were salaried employees.'

'I see.'

Tiara said, 'And the number two idiot? Well, he'd come in on Tuesdays, whether scheduled or not, to make the department's schedule for the following week. Yet, he had six other days to do this. When a friend of mine, at the store, who ran the dairy department, made the dairy schedule he did it weeks ahead, and knew all the schedules for the guys under him for any given week because he made the damned thing. I mean, it's just so ridiculous that these total incompetents were in charge. Thank God I got out of there. But, let me give you another example. So, continuing with the idea that they screwed up the scheduling; this other woman who worked in the cold cuts section.; instead of working 2-10 am, they asked her to change to 7 am to 3 pm for a while. I wouldn't do it. Neither would the others. But, this meant, on some days when only she and another were scheduled, that person would be alone, and guess who was the person that was always alone to work? Right. Me. There was a run of like eleven straight weeks, in fact, where I worked a full truck's worth of product alone- I mean there would be three or four pallets worth of product, and only me to work it, yet on other days there would be only two pallets, and all four workers in. It made absolutely no sense; but then nothing did. But it really riled me that I was always stuck with the biggest truck of the week to work on the mornings when only I was in.'

'Why did they do such a foolish thing?'

'Why not? I was just a worker, and if I left, they'd just hire another peon. After all, all Mexicans look alike to them.'

'So, you eventually left that department, right?'

'Yeah, but it was always something there. It was as if being happy or satisfied at work meant that something was wrong.'

'Well, it's not just at work. I've found that there are just some people who actually thrive on the chaos they cause.'

'Exactly, Kal. It's like they are vampires and misery is their blood.'

'Hahaha, that's a good comparison.'

'Yeah, well, let me give you another example with this meat manager woman. A few months after she started, she was gone for a month. She had

some vacation, but then we heard that her mother died, and she flew up north to take care of things, but when I first heard that the bitch's mother had died, my first reaction was to sigh, and say, *'Thank God- at least we'll have a break from her for a while.'* Of course, I felt guilty over this because some woman has just died, and here I am, over a thousand miles away, never having met this dead woman, only knowing of her through her idiot daughter, and yet I'm feeling relief, and even a little joy. So, one day, I'm telling this to another of the workers in the meat department and when I tell them they let out a gasp and say, *'Yes, I know what you mean. I felt the exact same thing.'* So, then I asked around, over the next few days, and without fail, every single person in the meat department felt good that the bitch was gone. I mean, every one of them likewise felt a little guilty over this. Then some woman said she felt embarrassed, and used this word I'd never heard of before: *schadenfreude*, but- '

'What is it?'

'What's what?'

'You said some big word I did not know.'

'Oh, *schadenfreude*?'

'Yes, that's it.'

'Oh, it's German for feeling good over someone else's misery or misfortune. There is no English equivalent. I'd never heard it before this other woman used it, but I kind of like it, so I use the word when needed. There's not even a Spanish equivalent for it; at least none that I know of.'

'I see.'

'Tiara said, 'But, think about it: this woman is so detested, so annoying, so ignorant, that when her mother dies, over a dozen people, who never met her mother, actually feel glad that she died, so that they can be away from her. I mean, most thought she was mentally ill, but there were others who just couldn't take her incompetence. There were a few folks who had worked with her before, in other stores or what not, and all of them couldn't stand her. But one guy was looking forward to it. Then, fastforward a few months, and he's as annoyed at her as the rest of us; in fact, more so. He told me: *'We do more work, we work harder, and we accomplish less. And that's in every single aspect of our jobs. It's ridiculous!'* Then she had that negative inventory I mentioned, and nothing was done to discipline her. So how was he ever going to learn? At least the number two meat manager lost his bonus when he badmouthed a butcher in front of other employees.'

‘Yeah, I know what you mean. It’s like with that James guy- he deliberately destroys product and nothing happens to him. Yet, I know, if I did something like that, the company would have been all over my ass.’

‘Yes, the same thing with this woman meat manager. One of the other women who worked in the department told me that she had worked for the company for fifteen or so years, back then, and had never seen someone get away with so much incompetence as that woman.’

‘Maybe she was sleeping with the store manager?’

‘That’s what some people thought, but I doubt it. I mean, she was not some model, in terms of looks, and she was a bit crazy in the head.’

‘Oh, believe me, being crazy would never stop a guy from screwing a chick that he liked.’

‘Oh, was that comment directed at me?’

They both laughed, and then they didn’t. It was a few weeks later, after that particular conversation, and, for whatever reasons, the oomph had gone out of Tiara’s and Kal’s relationship. Again, I guess I could go into excruciating detail over what happened and who said what to whom about what, but, in a sense, it wouldn’t really matter. The above conversation, itself, contains both the germs of their incompatibility and the reasons for their attraction, if you know what to look for. In an existential sense, theirs was simply a fling destined to not last too long. Their breakup was not memorable, nor even bitter. It just was. At least to Kal.

Tiara seemed to feel guilty over it, although it was neither party’s fault. She did feel guilty over having, in her mind, ‘*crushed*’ poor Kal’s heart and life, and for many years afterwards, especially as she met other men, fell in and out of love a few times, then met her husband, had three daughters of her own, found out her husband had strayed, then left her, and she raised her girls alone, she wondered what had become of Kal, and what would have happened had she not broken up with him. In her mind, though, she was certain that she was ‘*the one that got away*’ from him. She knew that their split had been harder on him than her, but, especially after her own middle aged loneliness set in, she felt most badly for herself.

The reality of Kal’s life was far different than Tiara’s presumption. Instead of her being ‘*the one that got away*,’ Tiara was almost wholly forgotten, and had it not been for the fact that, upon this single day he had chosen to ride down Highway 71 without his helmet, it all never would have returned to him, at least not at that moment and in that way. Perhaps it was just a



Saturday sort of memory? An end of the week thing? Far from being a regret, Tiara- whose last name he even forgot (was it Rodriguez, Torres?), was always, and vaguely, just *'that Mexican gal with the scar on her left butt cheek that turned him down near Big Bend.'* That was it. In fact, when he had initially forgotten her last name, it was only upon a chance encounter with an old pal that he had met up with shortly after Tiara had dumped him that he was told, again, what her last name was. But, just as easily as he had initially forgotten it, he re-forgot it. But not her ass.

It turned out that Kal had deeper worries on his mind. At the time he knew Tiara, he had given up on religion. This was not, in and of itself, some existential thing, just his realization of how silly it all seemed. Yet, was it really? He had doubts. Doubts of doubt, you ask? Yes, such things exist. The mind is a wondrous place. It was about this time that he met Derek Mother again, when Derek was then studying to be a priest. Derek and Kal became even better friends, in their second go round, and, despite his studying for the priesthood, Derek loved driving up and down the many peaks and valley of the Hill Country- especially on a motorcycle. He and Kal would discuss life and death and God and science, but never with hostility. One conversation always stood out in the minds of both men, even as the decades rushed by it. They were a few months into their reacquaintance with each other, and had parked on the side of a highway, and were looking over a fence, eating some food and watching the horses of this particular ranch prance and play with each other.

**Derek:** What a fine animal these horses are. One of God's finest creations.

**Kal:** No doubt these beasts are fine, but I don't see them as handiwork of anyone or any thing.

**Derek:** You're not the first man to doubt, Kal.

**Kal:** Well, you're not the first man to believe something for which there's no proof, you know.

**Derek:** The thing is the proof it needs.

**Kal:** Really?

**Derek:** Yes.

**Kal:** Then why is it? I mean, if God made everything, then why would he need proof?

**Derek:** The proof's not for him but for us. God made man on the sixth day. That means we've always had five days worth to catch up

on.

**Kal:** But why would he need to prove anything to us if he's farther above us than we are above ants?

**Derek:** Well, I didn't say the horse was made to prove anything. God did not create this fine animal to prove it to us. He needs not our approval. It just is a record that we see as proof.

**Kal:** Or not.

**Derek:** Ach!

**Kal:** To me, it seems like mankind is the one needing proving to, and it's because of this thing inside us that we make up God, or gods, or other things. We can't accept what's right in front of us.

**Derek:** All of life is not only the Lord's proof, but his meaning.

**Kal:** That makes no sense. Life has no meaning. Even if we accept that God exists, and go back to a first cause, why does the universe exist, the answer- because God made it, fails because then what made God?

**Derek:** God always was.

**Kal:** Then there's no need for him, 'cause you can just as easily say that the universe always was.

**Derek:** Ah, but your scientists have shown it had a Big Bang. Who do you think lit the fire?

**Kal:** I love it how you choose what suits you to twist things. Let's say that's right. I don't know, but it would not surprise me if folks in a hundred years knew something far different from a Big Bang. But, again, let's say that's so. That proves nothing. There's no need for a God. God is only invoked so people think their existence has meaning: if some great being made me then there has to be a reason. But, if I just got here because of a random series of unconnected events then I must be just an accident, too, with no meaning.

**Derek:** That seems like straight thinking to me.

**Kal:** So we're just playthings of God?

**Derek:** Not playthings, children.

**Kal:** And you don't think that's condescending? I mean, putting aside all the logical fallacies you need to believe in to sustain the idea of God, but, even at a gut level, doesn't it seem silly to be just a thing in some grander being's life. '*God is testing you,*' people say when the shit hits the fan. Why? What's in it for him? He made us, so he made

us imperfect. Why? To get his jollies watching us struggle and suffer?

**Derek:** Kal, you always see the worst in things. Our struggles give us meaning. God allows us to each find our own meaning.

**Kal:** Nonsense, we bring meaning to the cosmos. In fact, that's one of the few things I'm certain of. In fact, it's one of our greatest talents- to bring meaning out of meaninglessness. Granted, most people's meaning is pretty meaningless, but there are others who accomplish great things: Shakespeare, Mozart, Alexander the Great, Newton, Einstein- all the usual suspects. My meaning may not equal Lincoln's, but it can still be positive. The only reason for life, it seems, is so that the universe can know itself, that it exists. Otherwise, what would it matter if there were planets and stars and all that and no one to witness it, even if that witness was only a single celled creature. It seems absurd- a waste. I mean, yes, things are just 'cause they are, and I think religion is an attempt to sidestep the just because.

**Derek:** The just cause?

**Kal:** No the *just because*, as in, '*why is this like that?*' and the ultimate answer is 'because, just because.' I mean, why is there something and not nothing? Just because. I mean, you can say that there is a God, and he's some alien species who created this cosmos in some physics lab, or that we are nothing but a computer simulation- I've even seen whole books on the subject. That Dr. Seuss book- *Horton Hears A Who*- plays with that idea, too. I mean, no matter how far up or down the ladder one is, if it seems real it is real. I mean, let's say we are inside a computer program, which is inside another, and another, and so on. Well, maybe a trillion or more so ons need to go on until you get to the '*ultimate reality*' and God, if you will, but there still is that base level of reality, right? It's like the idea of the earth as the back of a giant turtle who stands on the back of another turtle, and so on to infinity. Same thing with the *Horton Hears A Who* idea- even if every electron is its own universe, and even if our universe is just a part of larger one, it alters nothing about our import, yet, somehow, some people think this makes us unreal. I don't. I find it offensive, and even religious people, like you, should, too.

As the memory of that conversation replayed itself in Kal's mind, he realized that enough time had passed so that he could head on down to Llano and meet his old friend. It was odd, because the memories did not seem that

long. He knew that, sometimes, long dreams could, in actuality, pass by in only a few seconds, or minutes, at most, but he had never before realized that the reverse could be true: that fantasies or memories, which seemed to last only a minute or so could actually see the passage of many minutes, or even a few hours. But, as he surveyed the countryside, it was apparent that this was so, and what had happened, regardless of his disbelief.

This was when Kal connected it all to his belief in God, for, he realized that, regardless of his prior disbelief, God just was and no amount of his disapproval would nor could stay the Lord from his mission, even if Kal, nor any mortal man nor creature, could understand what that mission was. This was when the shadows fingered through the scrublands and Kal got back on his bike. The real and in depth story of how Kal found religion, however- and it was NOT because of anything his friend the priest ever said, is a story for another tale. This one drew to its end as our protagonist got ever nearer to Llano. As Kal made the turn from 71 onto its merger with Highway 29, and headed east toward *Bella Sicilia*, and odd sensation gripped him, but it was nothing divine. As he pulled into the shabby parking lot of the restaurant he saw his black and white clad Roman Catholic priest friend. Derek, or Father, Mother, as many wittily (or not) referred to him, was beaming, as he stood next to a portly man Kal had barely an inkling of. At first, Kal was a bit peeved at having to share the attention of his friend, but the feeling soon dissipated. Kal parked his bike, and walked toward us, with a quizzicality beyond scrutiny.

Then the two men said to each other, when they asked each other why they were meeting here: 'Because there are no good restaurants in Kingsland!'

It was obviously an inside joke between the old friends, the meaning of which I only learned later.

Derek then smiled, and said, 'Glad to see you, Kal. I hope you don't mind, but I brought a friend with me. His name is Les McGonagh, and he has some interesting ideas about the San Saba County Fair and he also knows Lee Willetts, from the Cherokee Home For Children.

I said, 'Glad to meet you, Kal,' and extended my hand.

A moment passed before I saw any reaction within him, but then he extended his hand toward mine, and I shook hands with Kal Stevens, who was silent, smiled, and looked at me as if he had known me from some place and time not then, nor readily intuited. As quickly as his distanced looks rose, they soon fell, as whatever reservations he had built up came rushing down

upon him, as he seemed to recognize them, if not me.

As with any of his prior love affairs, or with the reason that Kal converted to Christianity, there surely is more to tell of both that meal and night, and what followed between the three of us, but the reality is that it all just sort of slid into place. Like so many others who seem to find direction in its lack, Kal, Derek, and I did the same. And that is the story of how I met a good friend of mine, at least as best as I can tell. *Why* I told you all of this is another tale entirely.